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AUSTRALIA'S #1 PC GAMING MAG

PC PowerPlay

SINCE 1996

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AND A CYBERPUNK 2077 SEQUEL TOO!

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EXCLUSIVE ACCESS

WARHAMMER 40,000

DARKTIDE™

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"AN AMBITIOUS YET CONFIDENT STEP FORWARD"

Ben Mansill has permanently crossed-eyes thanks to this terrible helmet design. Looks cool, but..

For my money, no developer has followed more successfully in *Left 4 Dead's* footsteps than Fatshark. The *Vermintide* games evoked that same co-op vs horde magic, while at the same time carving out their own distinct identity *and* pulling off a pitch-perfect version of the Warhammer Fantasy world.

Darktide is an ambitious yet confident step forward for a studio that's proven its chops – cleverly expanding, refining and, thanks to the Warhammer 40K setting, adding bloody big guns to the formula. I know what I'll be doing on November 30: purging the unclean.

BEN MANSILL
EDITOR
ben.mansill@futurenet.com

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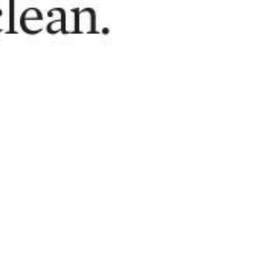
The PC PowerPlay team

SEAN MARTIN

This month
Headed out to Fatshark's offices to prove he's a bigger Warhammer nerd than any of them.

WES FENLON

This month
Taught us more about medieval fonts than we ever thought we wanted to know.



TYLER WILDE

This month
Checked out *Dead Space*'s remake and spiritual successor in one gory week.

MOLLIE TAYLOR

This month
Learned that rocket science is just a series of minigames. Not exactly brain surgery.

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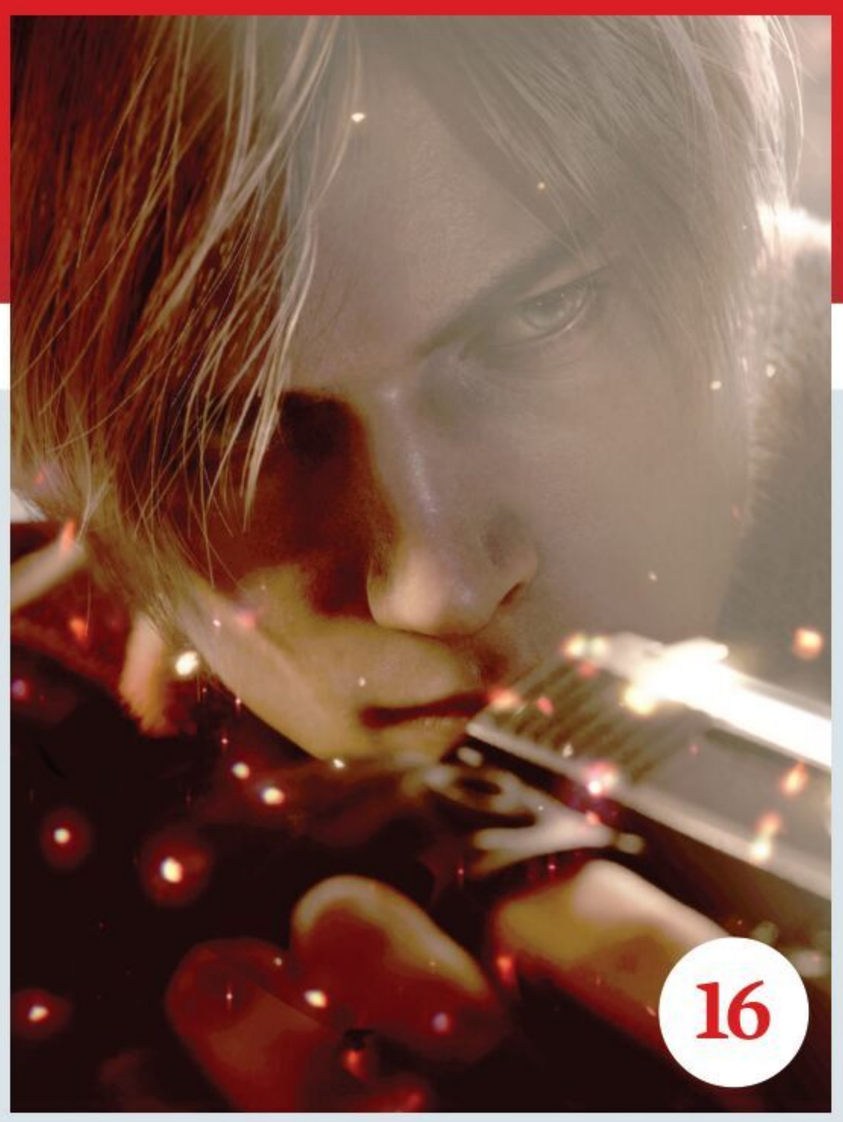

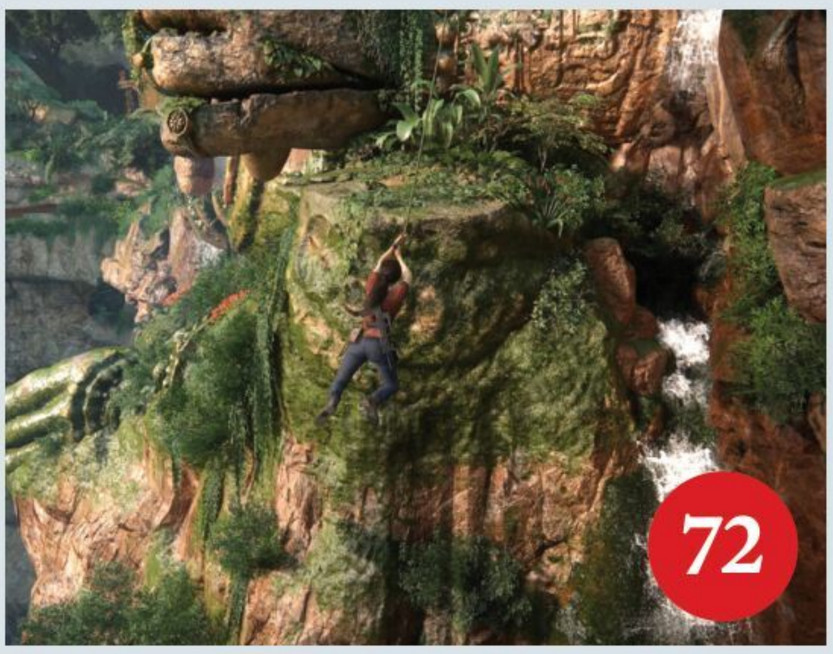

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WHY I LOVE GUILD WARS

How we vanquished maps in a bygone tradition from a legendary MMORPG.

GERALT-A HERE!

CD PROJEKT RED announces five Witcher games, a Cyberpunk 2077 sequel, and something new

CD Projekt is on the comeback trail. Ever since the botched launch of *Cyberpunk 2077* the studio has been quietly improving Night City, stopping only to confirm a new *Witcher* is in the works.

A new update says core studio CD Projekt Red has been working on two AAA projects since the beginning of 2022, and revealed a boatload of future projects in development elsewhere. Necessary caveat: we won't see some of these for ages.

We already knew the 'mainline' series is continuing with the game codenamed "Polaris", but CDPR now says this is the first in a trilogy which will release "in a six-year period starting with Polaris". The idea is that the first will be the foundation for the second and third, which CDPR thinks will "streamline development".

TOP: According to CDPR, Project Polaris will be a "story-driven open-world RPG built on the legacy of *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*".

Then there is Project Sirius, from Boston-based studio The Molasses Flood, which CDP's Adam KiciĐski says, "Will be set in the *Witcher* universe, but differs from our past releases in that it targets a much broader audience. Sirius will provide both singleplayer and multiplayer gameplay." *Witcher's Creed*, anyone?

CYBERPUNK 2077 IS DUE FOR AN EXPANSION IN EARLY 2023

Then there's Project Canis Majoris, a "full-fledged production" being developed by an external studio of *Witcher* veterans. It too is piggybacking off Polaris development, which suggests CDPR thinks Polaris will be a 'generational leap' title.

FIGHT CITY

Cyberpunk 2077 is due for an expansion in early 2023, and now

FTW. OH, WTF?

EVGA IS OUT

EVGA , famed for its FTW and Kingpin GPUs, some of the most popular in the world, has surprised everyone by dropping out of the graphics game entirely. Shrinking margins and a lopsided working relationship are reportedly to blame, but Nvidia's CEO holds it was an amicable split. ■ *JR*

IT'S A HIT!

WORLD OF WARSHIPS

The just-dropped November update for *World of Warships & Legends* includes playable submarines hitting the tech tree, as well as a selection of Japanese light cruisers entering early access. It's time to get good at high speed sneak attacks and stealth! ■ *JW*

BEEN HERE BEFORE

DEATH AND DISHONORED

Deathloop director Dinga Bakaba has confirmed that the game takes place in the *Dishonored* universe. Speaking on a recent Xbox podcast, he said: "We envisioned *Deathloop* to be in the future, after *Death of the Outsider*." That explains some of the noticeable similarities between the settings. ■ *IM*

TOP: "We started toying with the idea several years ago," said CDPR's Michał Nowakowski of Hadar. "Early-stage conceptual work commenced in 2021, and ... it is important to understand that right now we are still working on basic concepts".

ABOVE: In non-gaming news CD Projekt announced, unsurprisingly, it's looking for more partners in movie and TV, saying that the success so far shows "this is the right way to go".

CDP's announced a sequel is in development at the new CDP North America studio. For now there's only the codename 'Project Orion' and the claim it "will take the *Cyberpunk* franchise further and continue harnessing the potential of this dark future universe".

We're not done: CDPR also announced work has started on a new game codenamed 'Hadar'. This won't be seen for years, with CDP's Michał Nowakowski saying they're still "laying the groundwork".

A statement from CD Projekt added that multiplayer will be in "most of our new games", with an accompanying image showing Ciri and Geralt. The next mainline *Witcher* thus seems certain to include multiplayer, though whether it's full-on *Monster Hunter* time with a *Witcher* crew or merely something like PvP Gwent remains to be seen. And given *Cyberpunk*'s a first-person game with lots of guns and mods, and CD Projekt once planned to expand the original game with a multiplayer mode (which was cancelled), Orion may include a significant multiplayer element.

Five *Witcher* games, an expansion for *Cyberpunk 2077* and a sequel, then the all-new Hadar project. It's one hell of a slate but, from a studio that's been licking some wounds, it's even more a statement of intent. ■

Rich Stanton

Highs & Lows

HIGHS

Ferret out

Obscure sci-fi text adventure Ferret is now complete... forty years after development started.

No Man's High

After years of excellent updates *No Man's Sky* has hit 4.0.

Ultima sanction

The 25th anniversary of *Ultima Online* saw a dev tell of the time he identified cheaters and burned their (in-game) houses down.

Disco Dissolution

Disco Elysium creatives Robert Kurvitz, Helen Hindpere, and Aleksander Rostov have left Studio ZA/UM.

Streamer injury

After jumping into a foam pit during an event at TwitchCon San Diego, streamer Adriana Chechik broke her back in two places.

Metalegs

Meta's "most requested feature" for VR, according to Mark Zuckerberg? It's legs for the avatars.

Special Report

PCPP INVESTIGATES

Even characters speaking with the same script write slightly differently.

MASTER STROKE

How PENTIMENT's hand-crafted fonts give pen and ink a voice

Talking to Obsidian design director Josh Sawyer forced me into a harsh realisation: I have the handwriting of a peasant. Decades of education and the internet's infinite resources at my fingertips, and yet my messy chicken scratch would fit right in with a 16th century Bavarian peasant's in *Pentiment*. It's some consolation that Sawyer says his would, too.

In our defence, the printing press is a bit more established in 2022 than it was in the 16th century, when your writing spoke volumes about your education, social class, and profession. That granularity is why Obsidian partnered with design firm Lettermatic to create six unique fonts for *Pentiment*, each telling you something about the characters you meet and talk to while trying to solve *Pentiment*'s mysterious murders.

"Handwriting was changing a lot at this time, with different literacy levels," says Sawyer. "So a person who is a peasant and possibly illiterate, or doesn't read or write very well, uses a peasant script. Middle-class people tend to use a more refined cursive script. University-educated people, use a Humanist script. The older monks, especially if they're associated with the scriptorium, use a Gothic, blackletter font. And then the printers and people who read a lot of printed books use a printed typeface."

Those distinct typefaces are just the start of *Pentiment*'s font system. In a game about art and writing – protagonist Andreas Mahler is an artist in 1518 when the story begins – it was just as important for the text to feel tangible.

FONT OF KNOWLEDGE

When 'handwritten' dialogue appears it starts a dark, shimmering black, then dulls and flattens out like ink. It even bleeds a little, like it's being absorbed into parchment. Well-educated scribes write quickly and make few errors, but less-educated characters will write more slowly, and spelling errors will often appear in their dialogue. Characters who speak in printed letters will have their text appear as upside-down blocks before it's 'pressed' into the dialogue bubble.

"I wanted to capture the feeling of the physicality of writing," Sawyer says. "When you look at how dialogue appears in the game, it doesn't just slap on the page."

Obsidian even simulated the effect of dipping a pen in ink. "We try to replicate a mechanic that says, 'I'm going to run out of ink, and then I'm going to dip again in the ink, and then I'm going to start writing,'" says *Pentiment* programming director Brett Klooster.

I knew that *Pentiment* was doing far more with its fonts than most games, but I still underestimated how meticulous their creation ended up being. Riley Cran, the

Ink overload

One of *Pentiment*'s glyphs proved to be so complex, it literally couldn't fit into a laptop's RAM. "When our producer Alec Frey got to the fanciest font there was a ligature, a capital 'AE' and it was so elaborate his Surface ran out of memory," says Sawyer. "There were so many strokes in the glyph that it was just ridiculous."

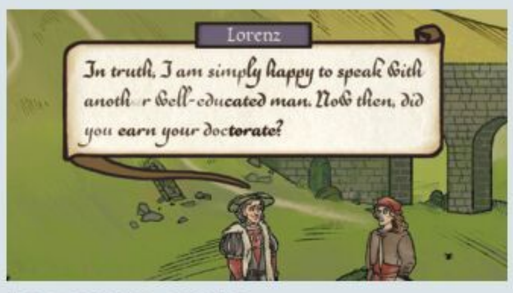
Andreas Maler
1518
Bookworm
Medicine
Heavens and Earth
Occultist
Basel
Nuremberg
Andreas spent most of his Wanderjahre in the Swiss canton of Basel. He knows some Italian and French and can reference cultural touchstones from Basel and nearby Bern, Zürich, and Freiburg.
Andreas spends all of his non-working free time finding and reading as many books as he possibly can.
Andreas studied medicine at the University of Erfurt before he dropped out. He understands the basics of human biology, medicine, and illness.
Move
Zoom
Esc Back

FAR LEFT: Now this is some skeuomorphism I can get behind.

LEFT: Think I'm gonna need both the easy reading font and a dictionary for this one.

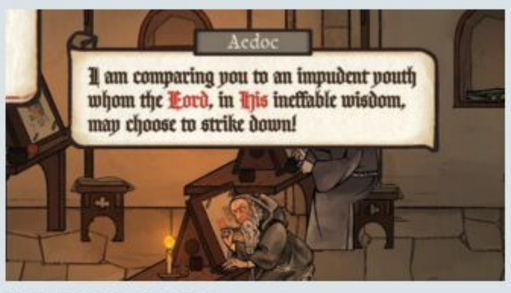
MEET THE PRESS *A closer look at four of* Pentiment*'s fonts*

PRINTERS' FONT
Printing press operators carefully arrange their letter blocks before they begin speaking.



LORENZ'S FONT
You can see the darker ink spots where Lorenz re-dipped his quill. Must be using one of those cheap quills...

VILLAGERS' FONT
Even *Pentiment*'s peasants have better penmanship than me, which is odd, but then I've never handled sheep before.



MONKS' FONT
The Monastic script is by far the most intense, both to read and to write, with all its extra lines and fanciness.

founder and lead designer of font firm Lettermatic, told me that *Pentiment* was a special case. Lettermatic designs most fonts to support a variety of weights and widths (light, bold, etc), but there are tricks to speed up that process. For *Pentiment*, "A much, much higher amount of those drawings were created individually. It was someone sitting there actually drawing it by hand," Cran says.

A *Pentiment* font isn't just 52 glyphs (aka unique versions of a letter, like lowercase and capital). To replicate handwriting, many letters need to be drawn in multiple ways to reflect where they appear in a word, or to add differences between the writing styles of different characters. Creating those variations wasn't going to work digitally.

"If you want to have two letter 'a's that don't match in the sense that they look like someone's hand drifted ever so slightly when creating one of those strokes, drawing that digitally is going to fight you more than help you. So that's why we had to do this analog process," Cran says. Lettermatic drew the fonts on paper and then scanned them digitally to capture the effects of pen on paper.

TYPE CAST
Each hand-drawn glyph was then supplied to Obsidian, along with a 'ductus diagram' that explains how each letter was formed: how many strokes comprise a letter, the order those strokes are made, even what direction the pen is moving. That may sound absurdly detailed, but think about a letter as simple as a lowercase 't'. How do you write it? Do you start the vertical line from the top or bottom? Do you draw the horizontal stroke from the left or the right? Which comes first?

That was vital information for Obsidian's designers. They created 'stroke masks' for each glyph, which allowed dialogue to appear not just one letter at a time, but stroke by stroke. After attempting to automate that process, they eventually went with what Sawyer calls the 'John Henry' approach. "We literally just stroked every single character manually," he says.

There ended up being 2016 of them. "Every single letter for the five non-printed fonts, every single letter had all of its strokes hand-maked, so that when you see them drawn out in-game, they come in in the correct order. Which is crazy, but it looks cool."

"I WANTED TO CAPTURE THE FEELING OF THE PHYSICALITY OF WRITING"

Pentiment's fonts are vital texture, but they also provide clues about the characters you're talking to – a scribe who makes lots of errors, for example, could actually be an impostor. As Andreas learns more about someone's background, their writing style can change fonts. But the fonts are only ever offering redundant information, in case you choose to play with *Pentiment*'s more accessible easy reading mode.

It wouldn't be a Josh Sawyer game without an optional hard mode, too. This one turns on characters like the 'long s' that looks like a cursive 'f', and some ligatures that connect letters together with some extra flourish.

"We joked about having a hardcore mode where every ſingle thing in the game iſ written in the fancieſt font, which iſ probably too nutſ," Sawyer laughſ. ■

Wes Fenlon

The Spy

BUT WHO WATCHES THE SPY?

Look, The Spy needs to level with you all, The Spy hasn't had the time to go out and find any rumours this month. The Spy's been busy, you know? There's a stack of emails that The Spy needs to answer, and they're the ones where you need to *do* something before you reply to say "yup, it's done". But doing the thing, while not hard, is a distraction from some other thing you were working on, and so you put it off and just feel kind of bad about it until it a) goes away, or b) becomes an actual problem.

THE SPY
The Spy will get back to you on this.

And then there's the meetings! Sandra from accounting gets in touch asking for a "quick chat" about a recent expenses claim, and suddenly The Spy's on the other end of a two-hour bollocking about using company money to cover up a high-speed chase through Zürich. "Why is it always PCPP giving us these problems? The staff writers at Practical Caravan aren't charging us tens of thousands for dubious black ops." That endured, The Spy *could* think about doing something productive – infiltrating an Austrian publisher to steal their upcoming release plans, perhaps – but the IT department has been in touch to say that The Spy still needs to finish a mandatory GDPR refresher course they sent out last month. And anyway, it's raining outside.

It's not like there isn't sleuthing to be done, either. In mid-October, Valve registered a trademark for something called *Neon Prime*, placing it under the identification categories of "computer game software, electronic game software, video game software, computer game programs downloadable via the internet". The Spy doesn't know about you, but that sounds a bit like what you might classify a PC videogame.

VALVE REGISTERED A TRADEMARK FOR SOMETHING CALLED NEON PRIME

Valve has been a mystery for years now, its successes largely designed as testbeds for its new hardware – *Half-Life: Alyx* for the Index, *Aperture Desk Simulator* for the Steam Deck. But its recent multiplayer attempts – *Dota Underlords* and *Artifact* – have failed to gain a foothold in their respective genres. Could *Neon Prime* be a normal, good Valve game? Someone should really head to Seattle to find out. Just maybe not The Spy, who is pretty tied up right now grinding Halloween events in games.

ELDEN BLING

On the upside, sometimes the rumours come directly to you. A recent update for *Elden Ring* contained some hints at what might be happening in the future, all of it beamed through Steam directly onto dataminers' hard drives. Patch 1.07's purpose was to separate balance between PvE and PvP, but dataminer Lance McDonald also found menu strings referencing ray tracing. McDonald even used a patched executable to display the ray tracing option in the settings menu. With the feature itself not actually in the game yet – turning it on breaks the graphics.

The patch also contained references to new maps, and an explicit mention of a 'DLC01'. And look, The Spy realises that "*Elden Ring* is probably getting a DLC" is not going to surprise anyone, but The Spy has multiple Star Wars shows to catch up on right now, and just can't quite find the energy to do the legwork on this. Here's your analysis: given the timings, an announcement at The Game Awards seems likely. There, done, that's at least one email The Spy can be rid of. Spy out. ■

The Spy

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DRIVING A COMMUNITY

MARTIN POLÁŠEK discusses the reality of being a community manager

Martin is senior community manager for *World of Tanks*, and is in fact in charge of community managers in the European region. This follows a journey of ten or so years, a journey he began when he decided to switch focus from graphic design in the printing industry to videogames.

In his early teens, he discovered what he describes as the "magic" of multiplayer games via LAN gaming and internet cafes. When he later in life decided to focus on games professionally, it was something of a challenge. "I come from the Czech Republic," he says, "and in central Europe it was not as easy, right? Unless you had a lot of experience." So, he started a 'quest' to gain that experience, which began with IRL community management.

Martin would, with the help of Blizzard's Versailles team and the local distributor, organise launch parties. "We got some goodies, we called the community together to some pub or a bar or something, and we basically celebrated the launch together." From there he moved into publishing, and then into esports where, again, he was responsible for working closely with people. As an account manager for the Czech and Slovakian region, he made sure that marketers and clients were taken care of; but he also looked after the players, making sure that they were happy and doing his best to deal with any grievances they may have had.

In 2020, he noticed that Wargaming had moved its publishing office to his home city of Prague, and was hiring for senior community manager. Needless to say, he got the job. So, what does he do now? What is a community manager?

MANAGING EXPECTATIONS

"I think if you ask ten people, ten people will give you a different answer," he says. But for his part, "It's basically glorified customer support for the most dedicated players. We are the people employed by the company to talk with the most engaged players, and make sure that the company listens to them. We go and talk with the players about things that are currently happening in the game. It can be a new tank, a new map... it can be multiple things within this kind of ecosystem of the live game."

Martin has learned some important things about the job within a few short years, including the fact that it's not just about listening to the community. He's fed into improving their experience, too. Community managers are an important tool in a live service game's kit when it comes to shaping the game.

When the *World of Tanks* community asked for an extension of the map pool to introduce some more variety, the developers were happy to oblige. However, map design for such a tactic-heavy game is important, so a new map was first introduced to players via a time-limited mode. "They had an opportunity to share feedback," says Martin. "Which positions they felt were too strong, which positions they felt needed a little bit more cover, etc. And out of those iterations, we sent those bits and pieces to our friends in development".

As a community manager, Martin has also had chances to see how his game's community is made up of varying ages, such as one occasion he vividly remembers from Tankfest 2021. He saw somebody bring a friend, their father, *and* their grandfather; and they all sat down to play together. "It was magical for us to see how cross-generational it actually is. And we're like, that's pretty nice. Here's a bonus code for extra goodies!"

Community managers get to see the best of a game's fanbase, while also having to contend with the fact that they are the most visible face of the company to their most enthusiastic players ("Our community has an almost perfect photographic memory," says Martin, "and they can go *years* back and say, 'But you said this, and you said this!'"). Don't treat CMs mean, and you can be sure that you'll keep 'em keen. ■

Luke Kemp

TANK (TABLE)TOP

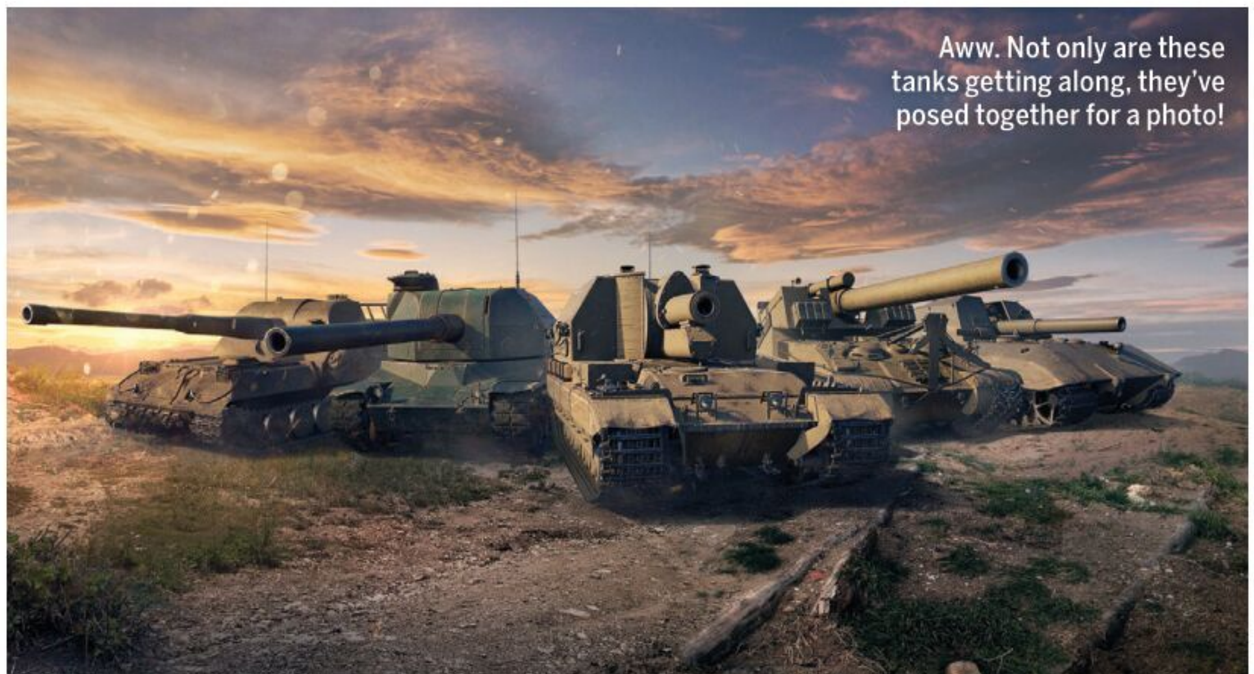
When Warhammer met Wargaming

VOLUSAD THASSIUS
Season VIII's Battle Pass saw a Thassius-themed E-100 in blue. Tanks are bigger than Ultramarines, pack even mightier firepower, and are almost as heavily armoured.

DOLGOTH SEPK
Sepk was introduced as a tank commander during the same season. Trundling around in an Object 430U probably makes for a nice holiday, when your home is literally called the Plague Planet.

KROGLIN DA FACEGRINDA
With a name like that, you might expect him to have the hottest album of 2022; but in fact, he's another part of the Warhammer crossover who boasted a themed STB-1.

"IT'S BASICALLY GLORIFIED CUSTOMER SUPPORT FOR THE MOST DEDICATED PLAYERS"



Aww. Not only are these tanks getting along, they've posed together for a photo!

ABOVE: You've got 'snow' chance against me!!! What do you mean, not funny? Please yourselves.

LEFT: If you look very, very closely, you *might* spot the camouflaged tank.

Incoming

THE BIGGEST GAMES ON THE WAY

1 month

THE CALLISTO PROTOCOL

RELEASE December 2, 2022 | **DEVELOPER** Striking Distance Studios

A spiritual successor to *Dead Space* from some of that game's original creators. Escape a prison full of mutants on Jupiter's second-largest moon.

MARVEL'S MIDNIGHT SUNS

RELEASE December 2, 2022 | **DEVELOPER** Firaxis Games

Create your own superhero to lead a team of iconic Marvel characters through turn-based battles in this strategy RPG from the creators of the modern *XCOM* series.

HIGH ON LIFE

RELEASE December, 2022 | **DEVELOPER** Squanch Games Inc

A colourful shooter from Justin Roiland, creator of Rick and Morty. Depending on your sensibilities you'll either find its rapid-fire dialogue very funny or intensely irritating.

3 months

FORSPOKEN

RELEASE January 24 | **DEVELOPER** Luminous Productions

A modern day New Yorker is transported to a fantasy realm, where her new magical powers come with the small catch that she has to save the world.

DEAD ISLAND 2

RELEASE February 3, 2023 | **DEVELOPER** Dambuster Studios, Fishlabs

Yes, it's back, and it looks like it's actually coming out this time. It seems pretty decent too – we really enjoyed its brutal melee combat in our recent hands-on.

COMPANY OF HEROES 3

RELEASE February 23, 2023 | **DEVELOPER** Relic Entertainment

The most recent delay was almost too much to bear, but it's not long now before this epic WWII RTS, set in the Italian and North African theatres, is in our hands.

6 months

SKULL & BONES

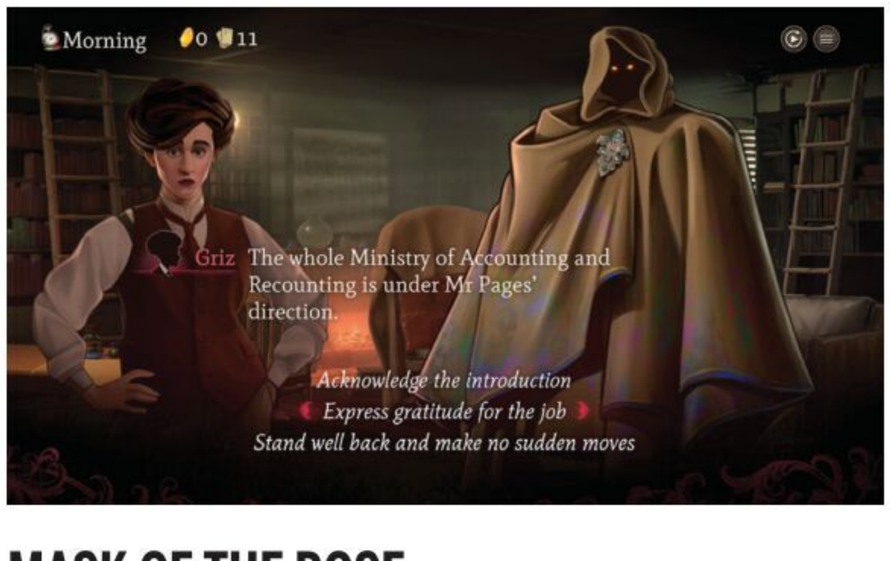
RELEASE March 9, 2023 | **DEVELOPER** Ubisoft

Nearly a decade since it started development as a spin-off to *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag*, Ubisoft's pirate ship battler finally has a release date.

RESIDENT EVIL 4

RELEASE March 24, 2023 | **DEVELOPER** Capcom

A ground-up remake of the classic original, much like *Resident Evil 2*, that promises more tension and bigger scares to go with its updated graphics, story, and controls.


Morning
0
11
Griz
The whole Ministry of Accounting and Recounting is under Mr Pages' direction.
Acknowledge the introduction
Express gratitude for the job
Stand well back and make no sudden moves

MASK OF THE ROSE

RELEASE April, 2023 | **DEVELOPER** Failbetter Games

A wonderfully strange dating sim set in the *Fallen London* universe – a world where the Victorian era is warped by the supernatural and Lovecraftian.

12 months+

DIABLO IV

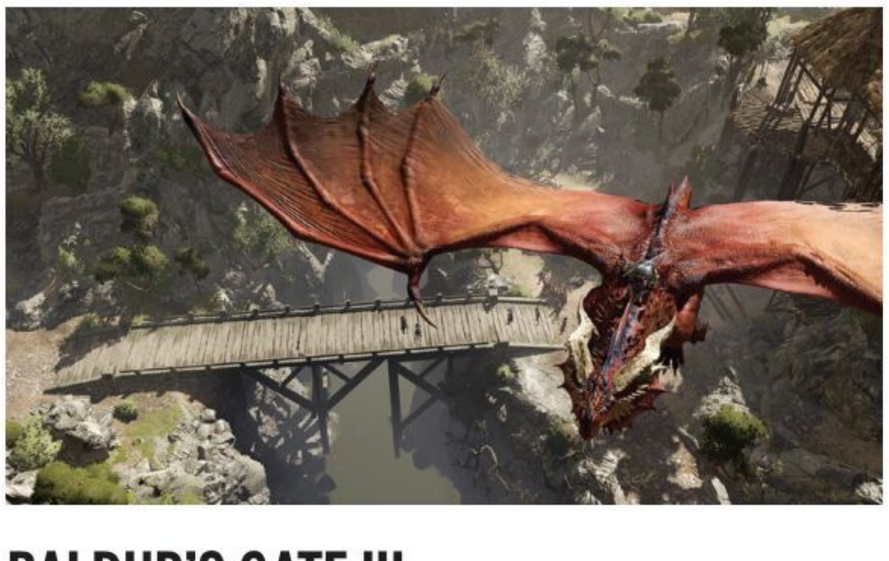
RELEASE 2023 | **DEVELOPER** Blizzard

The beloved action-RPG series' latest sequel promises a darker look than its predecessor, a more open world, and hopefully no pay-to-win auction house.

ALAN WAKE II

RELEASE 2023 | **DEVELOPER** Remedy Entertainment

We don't have much to go on with this sequel (technically the third *Alan Wake* game) yet, though *Control* offered hints with its shared-universe DLC.



BALDUR'S GATE III

RELEASE 2023 | **DEVELOPER** Larian Studios

Already long out in Early Access, but there's plenty of content still to be released before this behemoth of an RPG hits 1.0 and finishes out its epic story.

DELAYED

OUT OF SPOCK

Story-driven adventure *Star Trek: Resurgence* has been delayed to April 2023, in order to give more time to "give the game a final coat of polish, and create a truly immersive Star Trek experience".

PREVIEW

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
March 24, 2023	Capcom	In-house	residentevil.com

RESIDENT EVIL 4

The remake retreads old ground in style, but is too familiar

R*esident Evil 4* is almost 20 years old and god if that doesn't make me want to crumble into a pile of dust. The prospect of a remake, on paper, isn't that egregious given the time span but the original is so widely available, so beloved and still perfectly playable in 2022 that the common question surrounding this remake has been: does it justify its existence? For newcomers, this will undoubtedly be one of 2023's best action horror games. For those familiar with the original, this will be a neat trip down memory lane that suffers perhaps for staying too close to the original.

The main concern I saw from fans was that this would dump the one liners and camp in favour of a story that takes itself more seriously. Not that the recent remakes are strangers to quips (the *Resident Evil 3* remake is full of 'em) but if that was your fear then I'm happy to report that, despite a slight shift in tone, the cheesy dialogue is still here, as dumb and entertaining as ever. "Where's everyone going?" Leon utters, aloud, to nobody at all after nearly being stabbed and bludgeoned to death mere seconds earlier. "The bingo?" It highlights, though, the odd space this remake occupies. By not straying further from the original, it has less to offer returning players. Shouldn't the point of a remake be to do something different, to take the premise in a bold new direction?

Which isn't to say it has nothing to offer those returning. Far from it. This is a souped-up version of the original with overhauled controls that allow for moving and shooting. Even Leon's animations are different, portraying him as a little more confident in light of the training he's undergone between 1998 and 2004. He can even parry attacks now, something that is sure to improve certain enemy encounters later in the game. Unsurprisingly, the remake's graphics are the most drastic change. Character models and environments have a level of detail that invites you to stare into the crazed expression of every bloodthirsty villager you encounter. Leon's jacket looks positively cosy. The colour palette, too, has become much richer and more diverse.

I'd need more time with the game to decide how I feel about the overall look, but while it's certainly an extremely handsome game in its own right, my initial impression was that I missed the sepia tone of the original's decrepit woods and locales. Even the time of day is initially different, starting in a gloomy early morning twilight that doesn't convey the same sense of a barren forest. The remake has to sell the village's decay in props and other cues, something it admittedly does well, but one glance at the washed-out brown world of the original was enough to tell you everything.

PLAYED IT

UNSURPRISINGLY, THE REMAKE'S GRAPHICS ARE THE MOST DRASTIC CHANGE

PAINT THE TOWN

Creeping up on the iconic central village location is, however, save for the graphics, almost exactly as you remember it. Bringing out your binoculars to scout out the location, you can see the villagers burning a pyre with one of the missing cops on it. Then it's time to venture in, where one immediate difference is apparent: Leon can sneak now. Early in the demo I use it to avoid an enemy altogether. The village encourages more crouched creeping, and while it's pretty simplistic, it allows me to take out a few villagers (mainly old nans) before things kick off. It feels like a tweak to the formula rather than a substantial addition. No matter how stealthy you are, sooner or later you'll be faced with an entire village who want to run pitchforks through you. Cue blocking doors with bookcases, kicking

Resident Evil 4

ladders from windows... the idea of Leon as an outsider under siege is wholly intact. At this point the remake's energised take is realised.

MI CASA

There's a lot more villagers in the remake than in the original, for starters, and the village square is itself a bit larger, with more paths and areas to explore. Able to sprint and move while aiming, Leon handles more in the remake like how you feel, enabling panicked scrambling behind barns and over fences to stay out of reach of enemies. There's none of the gentle pacing of last year's *Resident Evil Village* (itself littered with homages to *4*) here.

There's no blocking or guarding. Enemies will grapple and lodge their axes in Leon with ferocity, or even throw weapons, not hovering around to give the player a window of opportunity. Neither do they lurch forward like the zombies of the recent remakes or shuffle at the pace of the original game's villagers – here your foes will run and lunge at you, easily matching the mobility the remake's controls afford Leon. Though for all his movement, he lacks Jill Valentine's helpful dodge move, so evading enemies feels a lot more fraught than it did in *3*. You do, however, have that ability to parry, which opens enemies up to follow up attacks.

The knife in the remake is no longer a weapon to be equipped, but a tool always at the ready, bound to a melee button for quicker use. But it does have a draining meter, so if you use it too much it will break and leave you a bit more defenceless. Leon is never truly helpless, though – you'll still be able to roundhouse kick whole group of enemies so long as you can stun one of them. Which was always really the magic of *Resident Evil 4*, finding creative ways to overcome seemingly impossible odds.

CHAINSAW MASSACRE

In this set-piece, the remake nails that feeling and then some. Its aggressive speed breathes new life into the classic village mob attack, the scene now a good bit larger and more populated than in the original. The ramped-up pace makes every moment feel that bit more desperate and chaotic. Standing your ground never lasts long. Turning the tide means being a little lighter on your feet instead of lining up perfect shot after perfect shot.

If that wasn't enough it's also loaded with new dynamic moments. Such as when the iconic chainsaw lad cuts down a balcony, blocking one of the paths around the village and depriving me of options. Or later, when he collapses a floor I happened to be standing on. You bet I absolutely squealed in surprise. You can even set a bull on fire, turning it into a raging battering ram, though if I'm honest I would rather spare the poor cow. If the remake can keep up this degree of complexity for the whole game, it will be something quite impressive to behold, and I'm already curious about how it'll tackle other set-pieces from the original.

FAMILIAR HAUNTS

Despite all this new vigour, the portion I played went through all the same moments as the original. Get besieged in the house, wait for Dr Salvador to show up with his chainsaw, survive until the bell tolls and the villagers are summoned away. Cue cheesy one-liner. I'm not immune to the charm of nostalgia, and, look, *Resident Evil 4* is still a great game – by extension, so is the remake. I just can't shake the feeling that all this effort is a little bit wasted on something that, despite a couple of minor twists, I could recite by heart.

These remakes have pushed the series to an unrivalled level of polish and slickness, wielding its tools so expertly, that it feels a shame to throw that effort at a retread of a game fans will know inside out. For all the clever changes, and promises of greater divergences, I can't shake how thrilling it would be if all this craft was brought to bear in a new instalment, one with its own voice and memorable moments. The *Resident Evil 4* remake is going to be a riot for new players, realising a scope the original could only dream of while staying true to its vision. Yet I'd be a lot more excited were all of this applied to something new, something where I didn't know each step on the path. Capcom has perfected their action design in these three remakes, I just wish it was truly let loose instead of chained to the past.

Samantha Greer

YOU'LL STILL BE ABLE TO ROUNDHOUSE KICK WHOLE GROUPS OF ENEMIES

ABOVE: Villagers are much more numerous than in the original game, and faster too.

LEFT: The new graphics are undeniably lush but they do change the atmosphere.

Wild Hearts

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
Feb 16 2023	Koei Tecmo	Electronic Arts	ea.com

WILD HEARTS

Koei Tecmo's new game is like *Monster Hunter* on fast-forward

W*ild Hearts* comes to us from Koei Tecmo's Omega Force team, and it's clearly a direct competitor to Capcom's *Monster Hunter* series. It's also the studio's second bite at this cherry, following the demon-slaying *Toukiden* series. The new trick? More gadgets than you can shake a giant sword at.

In the hands, *Wild Hearts* has more than a few interesting tricks up its sleeve. It's been in development for four years and the basic pitch is hunting, crafting, and various constructions called karakuri. The latter is what sets *Wild Hearts* apart, as these devices are constructed in real-time at your command, there are a ton, and they can be combined. Many focus on manoeuvrability, with a simple example being a big ol' tower with a ladder which you can build next to a monster, sprint up and jump off to attack.

You craft karakuri through gathering (plentiful) materials and, as well as combining with each other, they have bespoke interactions with each of the game's eight weapon types. Some of these are exactly what you'd expect: a big katana, a whacking great hammer, a bow... we've been here before, and in similar fashion. Others are more curious, like a bladed umbrella that looks like something out of *Bloodborne*.

You'll need that flexibility because a striking aspect of *Wild Hearts* is that these beasts (their true name is "kemono") are absolutely gigantic. One of the early game monsters you'll fight is a boar and it's just so massive you're taken aback: right out the gate you're fighting something bigger than a fire engine.

The game's mechanics lean into this, and particularly neat to see is the ability to clamber on the kemono to reach those especially stab-worthy areas. This is more arcadey than *Monster Hunter*, the combat a little faster and looser than the anchored precision of Capcom's game, and it has moments where it goes all-out in amusing ways, such as everything stopping at a fight's end for an over-the-top 'finisher' blow to play out.

Yes, you carve the monsters when they're dead and, yes, you make things out of them. The kemono include a plant-infused squirrel, the giant 'king-tusk' boar, an incredibly nasty looking wolf, and a fire monkey who looks very angry because he's on fire.

A STRIKING ASPECT OF WILD HEARTS IS THAT THESE BEASTS ARE GIGANTIC

PLAYED IT

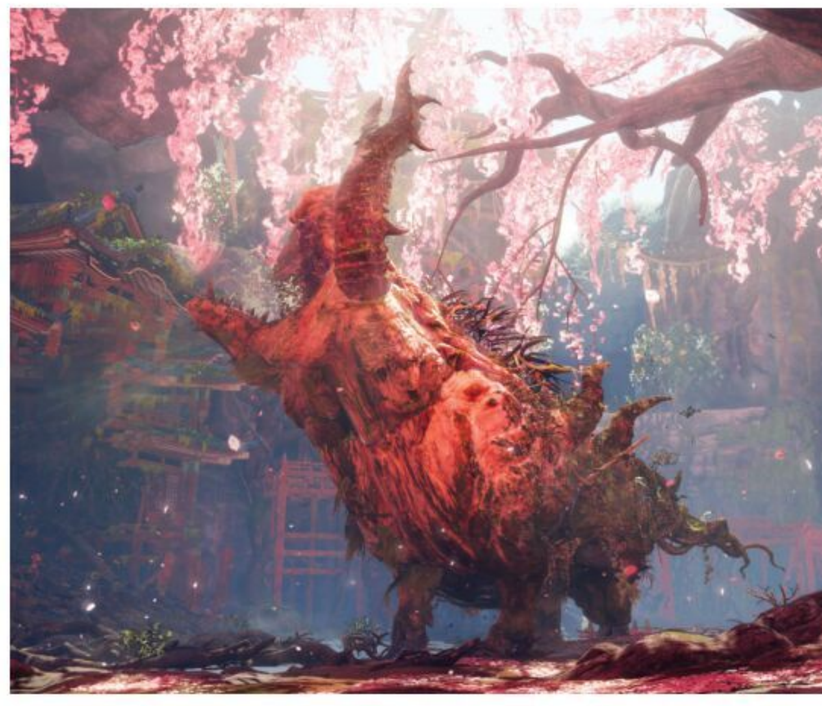
THREE'S A CROWD

Wild Hearts can be played single-player or co-op: though with multiplayer, it goes for a maximum party size of three, and aims for a more contiguous experience than the usual hunt-hub-hunt. The game is going for a more relaxed open world vibe, with elements of exploration and messing around, supported by drop-in crossplay and dynamically scaling difficulty.

In terms of just being in the open world, there are plenty of karakuri designed explicitly so you don't have to go back. So you can trigger hunts in the world, upgrade and craft by building a workbench, access the map to choose new targets, switch between solo and co-op on-the-fly, and so on.

The endgame, and *Wild Hearts*' post-launch support, will determine whether or not this is a serious competitor to *Monster Hunter*. The surprising thing is that, when you strip back the many points of comparison, it doesn't play like that game. This is a more action-oriented take on the hunt, but with a focus on exploration and persistent worlds that Capcom's game arguably lacks. *Wild Hearts* is a stranger twist on the formula than it looks, and there's few better cores for a game anyway than hitting something massive with a big stick.

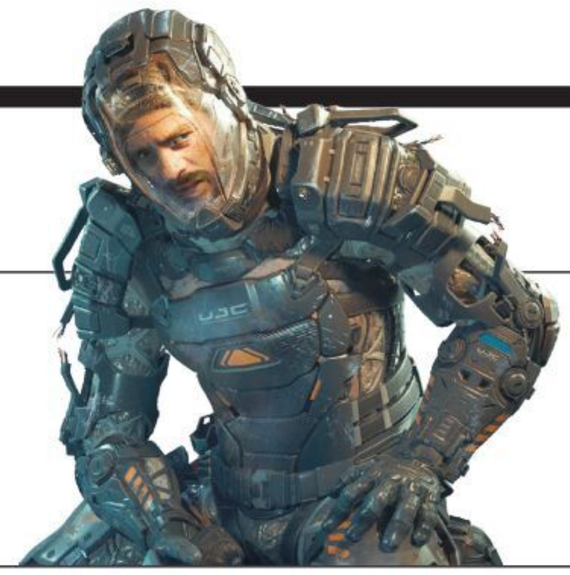
Rich Stanton

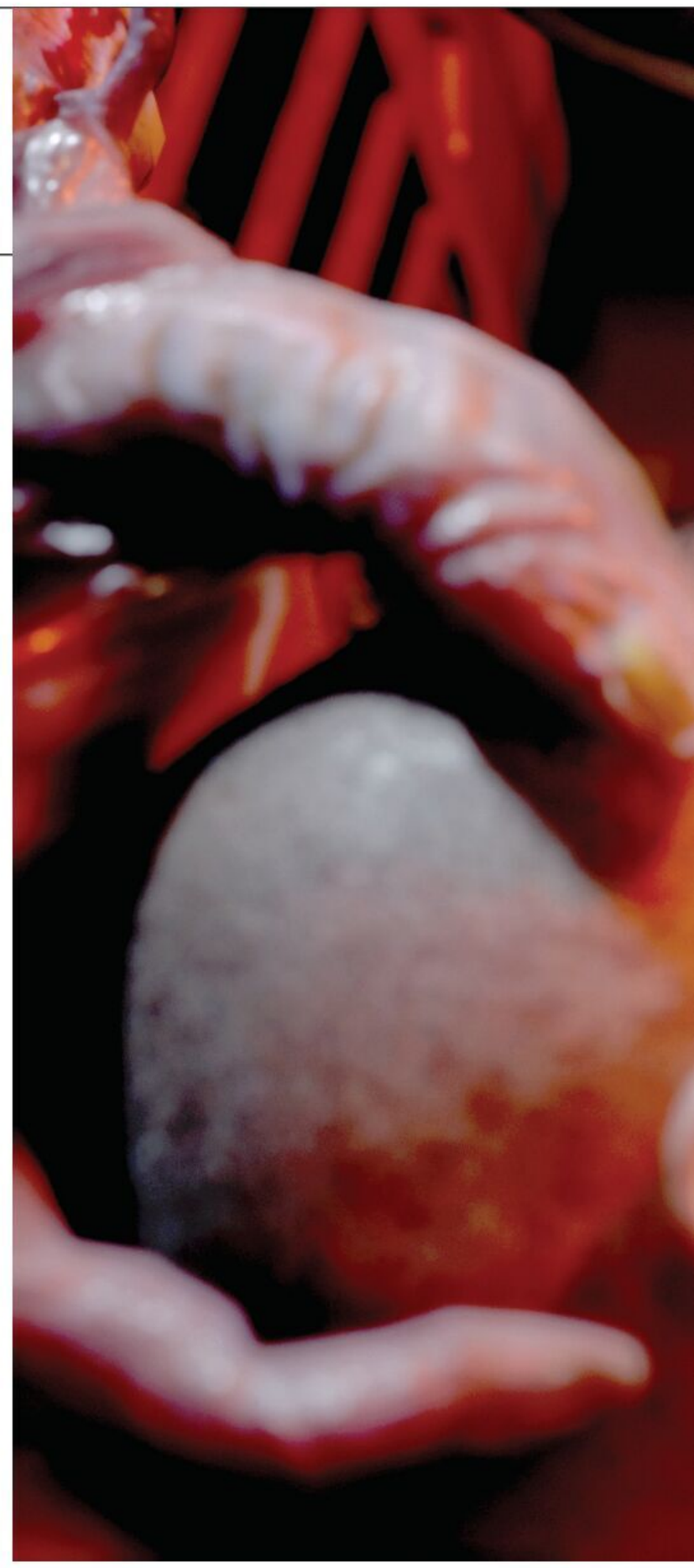


ABOVE: He wouldn't talk about *Toukiden* but this game represents, in developer Yosuke Hayashi's words, the team returning to "unfinished business in the hunting game genre".

LEFT: Karakuri types include springboards that yeet your character into the air with a glider, zip lines, and human catapults. They're not all movement-focused, though a lot are.

The Callisto Protocol





NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
December 2, 2022	Striking Distance Studios	Krafton	callisto.sds.com

THE CALLISTO PROTOCOL

Trapped in space with corpse monsters, just like old times

Zombies aren't murderers. Driven by mindless hunger, they're more like a natural disaster, so it doesn't really make sense to be mad at them. That's how you know *The Callisto Protocol* is not a zombie game: its mutants don't eat you when they catch you, they smash your face in. And I certainly did get mad at the slimy bastards.

The Callisto Protocol comes from original *Dead Space* co-creator Glen Schofield, which is very easy to deduce. It takes place in a space prison overrun by mutated living dead – the original idea for *Dead Space*'s setting – and you play as a rugged dude named Jacob Lee who has a glowing health bar on his neck and telekinesis powers. He and Isaac Clarke are pen pals, at the least.

This is a slower experience than *Dead Space* and its upcoming remake, though. Objects on the ground don't teleport into your inventory, Jacob bends down and picks them up. There are items that heal on pickup, but actual health packs trigger an animation that takes several seconds – long enough to die. The camera gets extra tight when he's crawling through pipes, and lags behind him whenever he makes a 90-degree turn, just to freak you out for a moment.

In a fairly early level (but not the first), I wandered through industrial-looking corridors and laboratories and goopy sewers, taking a straightforward path through Black Iron Prison's ironworks. The level wasn't choked with mutant encounters, and I felt at times like I had nothing to do but creep forward and appreciate the detail. I liked the feeling that I was in an elaborate haunted house, and combat is exhausting enough that I was glad it wasn't a constant activity.

I LIKED THE FEELING THAT I WAS IN AN ELABORATE HAUNTED HOUSE

PLAYED IT

YOU'VE GOT GUTS

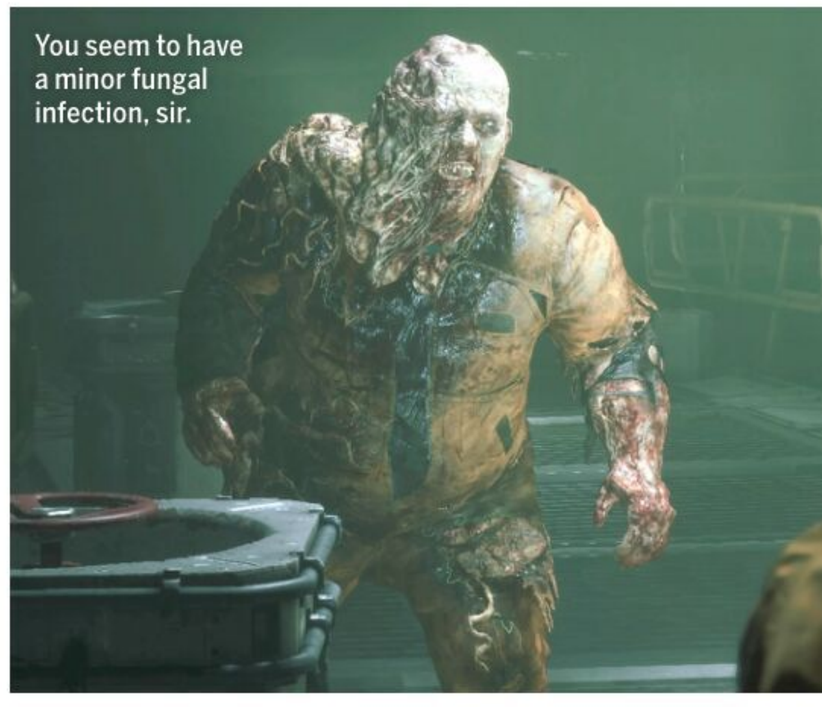
If the gross corpse mutants win, they glory kill Jacob like he's a *Manhunt* victim and it's back to a checkpoint. It's even grislier than *Dead Space*, and for me tougher. Your best friend in *The Callisto Protocol* is not a ranged weapon like *Dead Space*'s plasma cutter, but an electrified baton. Whack a mutant with it a few times and you can snap to them with your pistol to take a sure shot. Then it's back to whacking. The mutants mostly don't move fast and should be easy to hit with mouse control (my demo was on a PlayStation, so I had to use a controller), but that perhaps console-centric design also serves as a clue to conserve ammo. It's not endless, and reloading is slow.

Fighting on the inside, you can avoid damage by dodging left or right or blocking, but I never got the hang of it.

I survived with the help of the telekineses ability, which I used to huck enemies out of range when I was losing control. I died lots, especially in one room where I struggled to dodge one enemy's acid-spit while dealing with others. Jacob's movement is not quite early *Resident Evil* awkward, but it's on that side of things.

Later, I encountered a non-biological enemy: a patrolling guard robot whose vision cone I had to avoid. At that point I'd made it out of the sewage via a waterslide sequence, the standard videogame kind where you navigate left or right to avoid obstacles and spinning blades. Along with occasional 'press button quickly to not die' bits, that segment reminded me that this isn't some weird indie arthouse thing. Schofield has also directed games like *Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare*. There's console action-adventure flavour here, too. I like some easy spectacle with my brutal fights – complaining about quick time events is so 2008, right? – and I caught a little of it before my preview time was up: a glimpse of Jupiter in the sky. Play this one on a big screen, if you can.

Tyler Wilde



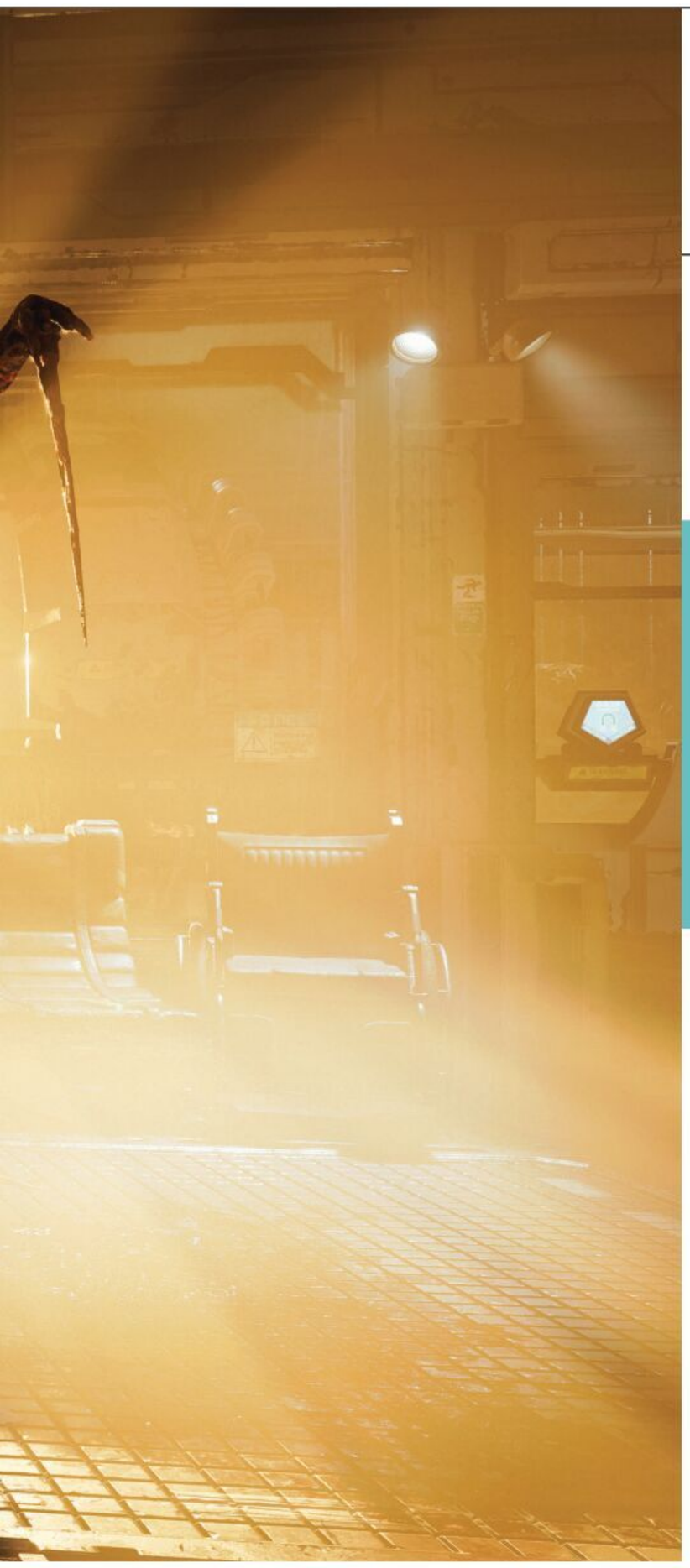
ABOVE: Should have shot this guy in the tentacles.

LEFT: But no one will blame you for using a gun.

Dead Space

ABOVE: Intestine detail has increased dramatically.

RIGHT: A tense meeting with the Ishimura's captain.



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
January 27, 2023	Motive Studios	EA	ea.com/games/dead-space

DEAD SPACE

Isaac Clarke returns in a remake of the 2008 classic

When I think of *Dead Space*, I picture voiceless engineer Isaac Clarke creeping through the mining ship Ishimura, his face always obscured by the glowing green bars of his helmet. His only company is the gurgling roars of necromorphs and warnings finger-painted on the walls in blood.

When I visited EA to play a few chapters of the upcoming remake, I wondered why Motive Studios did away with that lonely mood. It turns out my memory just sucks.

It's true that Isaac doesn't speak in the original *Dead Space* – he does in the remake, sparingly – but he's no loner. He's got a girlfriend, for crying out loud, and his crewmates and others bug him with video calls throughout his ordeal on the Ishimura. Even the dead talk to him, because before their corpses became puppets for alien DNA, they recorded their day-to-day concerns in audio logs that they carelessly left scattered throughout the ship's facilities. (I'd forgotten how big of a buzzword 'environmental storytelling' was back in 2008.)

Yep, still easy to run out of ammo and die.

VERTICAL SLICE

So the remake appears to be pretty faithful, actually. As Isaac, you make your way through the Ishimura fixing busted systems and carving up the alien undead. That carving is most memorably done with the plasma cutter, a tool which shoots vertical or horizontal lines to sever grotesque heads and fang-like limbs. The only big difference in the remake is that the necromorphs are no longer blurry, pixely messes. Now they're sharp, shiny messes, and their skin peels away to reveal pink muscle.

The remake looks like what I remember *Dead Space* looking like 14 years ago, even though it couldn't have been nearly as complex, gross, foggy, or realistically lit as it is now. I love that Isaac's big stomps – used to squish necromorph corpses, causing ammo or money to pop out – are still animated in the chunky, not-quite-natural way that was popular at the height of the *Gears of War* era.

The original's kinesis and stasis powers and puzzles are preserved, with one interesting elaboration: some rooms contain fuse boxes that allow you to power up systems so long as you're willing to power another system down. You could turn an elevator on at the expense of turning the lights off, for example. I'm told that later in the game you'll have to depressurise areas of the Ishimura, or even turn off gravity.

In the zero-G sections of the original *Dead Space*, you were stuck to the ship with magnet boots, and could only leap from surface to surface. In the remake, you can fly around like you can in the sequels, and it's fun to track leaping necromorphs as they zoom through space. You can also explore this version of the Ishimura from front-to-back without loading; the game is all "one shot" the developers say. And unlike the original, you won't be entirely safe when you return to areas you've already explored. Throughout the remake, an 'intensity AI' will mix surprise necromorph attacks in with the scripted ones, and otherwise try to spook you by messing with the lights and sounds.

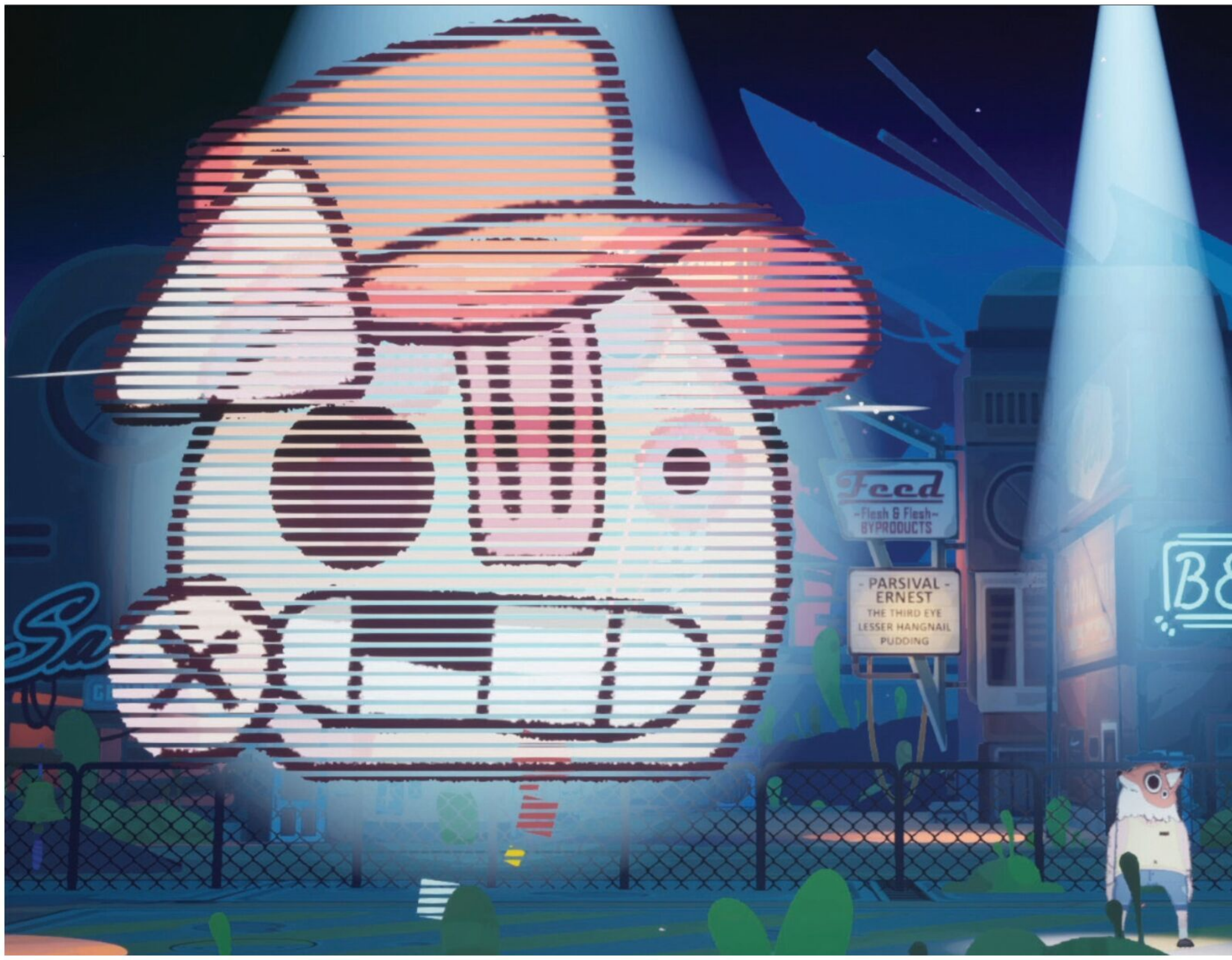
The 'director' doesn't turn it into *Left 4 Dead*; there are no swarms of zombies. The additions seem fairly subtle; and overall the new *Dead Space* feels a lot like the old one, just bigger and better looking. I struggle to think of a better way to remake a recent classic like *Dead Space*. I also wonder if it will be a hard sell for a rebuilt 2008 game, but the *Resident Evil 2* remake seemed to be popular, so maybe the time is right to bring back landmarks in the survival horror genre.

Tyler Wilde

PLAYED IT

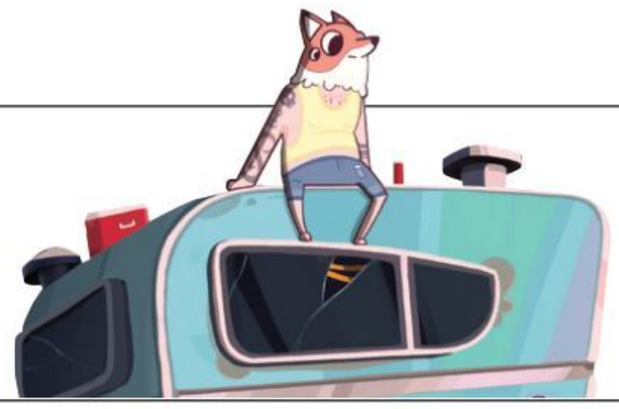
THE ORIGINAL'S KINESIS AND STASIS POWERS AND PUZZLES ARE PRESERVED

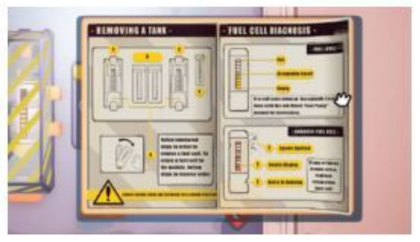
Uncle Chop's Rocket Shop



ABOVE: Do badly at your job and you'll be murdered. PCPP runs pretty much the same way.

RIGHT: Some ships are straightforward, mechanical rockets. Some are... weirder.





NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
TBC	Beard Envy	Kasedo Games	kasedogames.com

UNCLE CHOP'S ROCKET SHOP

A reverse-*Kerbal* set in a juxtaposed future Americana

As developer Beard Envy gears up to show me *Uncle Chop's Rocket Shop*, I realise I actually have no idea what this game is about. I'd been pulled in by the incredibly vague trailer, touting a surreal kaleidoscopic vibe straight out of Cartoon Network's renaissance era.

As a complete sucker for that stuff, I was curious, yet worried that would be where my interest ended. But as it turns out, I had nothing to fear.

Uncle Chop's Rocket Shop is all about spaceships in some far-flung southern American future. You're fixing them up and paying rent in the hopes Uncle Chop won't straight-up murder Wilbur, the humble repairman you play as. He's a strange little dude, a sort-of human sporting a multi-eyed fox head who can fart his way up ships to reach every nook and cranny. Each day gives eight minutes to repair as many ships as possible. Select a job, wait for the ship to come down, and get to work.

Handily, the game provides manuals to help figure out what the hell you're supposed to be doing, with a slew of different manufacturers and brands to wrap your head around. They vary from simple mechanical parts to alien slugs and even a sentient AI that must be played around with until it's in the correct mood.

SHIPSHAPE

Repairs are done through a series of small minigames, like perfectly timing a gas canister fill. Let go too early and you're short-changing the client. Let go too late and the canister bursts, forcing you to replace it out of your own pocket. The minigames gradually get more finicky, like having to unscrew and keep track of the various bits and pieces of each module, but you'll be rewarded for your effort.

You can consult the manuals for the most basic, run-of-the-mill fixes, but Beard Envy says there's actually a lot of room for experimentation. What if, instead of oil, you filled the guy's spaceship with coffee? Sometimes the results of your tomfoolery will be immediate, while with others it could be days until you have a very pissed-off, caffeine-soaked alien on your doorstep.

Repairing ships will go towards paying off each week's rent and avoiding death, but extra coins can be put towards some nice workshop upgrades. It should eventually allow for bigger, better ship repairs and hiring helpers to make life a wee bit easier. The developer also tells me there are some mystery contraptions that can be discovered as you venture deeper in, and I get the impression that the three-man team has tried to think about everything.

FIRST LOOK

When your fox head isn't buried inside some bizarre module, there are a plethora of characters knocking about this weird slice of space-bound Americana. Clients have different personalities, like one alien who seems very keen to pet you. You can run around and chat with people who work or live nearby before your shift starts, offering an overarching narrative and allowing you to align yourself with certain groups that inhabit the area. I didn't get to see much of the story element, but there was a lovely twang of British humour running through the US setting.

Uncle Chop's Rocket Shop looks quirky and fun, and I get the impression there's a surprising amount of depth hidden within its roguelite elements. While I initially came for its looks – and it does look stunning, scratching an aesthetic itch deep in my brain – I've been roped-in by how it plays, too. It's weird and wonderful in all the ways I want my games to be, like an interactive, deadlier episode of Regular Show.

Mollie Taylor

THERE WAS A LOVELY TWANG OF BRITISH HUMOUR RUNNING THROUGH THE US SETTING

SILENT HILL 2

FIRST LOOK

The hills are alive with the sound of announcements

Following the cancellation of *Silent Hills* in 2015 (the game that the enduringly popular *PT* was a teaser for), Konami has seemed barely interested in videogames, let alone *Silent Hill*. So it was surprising to say the least to see the firm suddenly announce not one but three new games in one go.

First up is a long-rumoured *Silent Hill 2* remake. Early footage looks promisingly pretty, and certainly faithful to the story beats of the original. I have my misgivings, however, about the developer Bloober Team – to my mind its last game, *The Medium*, demonstrated a desperately poor understanding of exactly the kind of character-driven horror *Silent Hill* is built on (though it must be said, our reviewer at the time felt differently!).

Silent Hill Townfall has a more promising pedigree – nothing has yet been revealed about its premise, but this all-new game is being handled by publisher Annapurna Interactive and developer No Code, which created the wonderfully atmospheric *Stories Untold*.

Meanwhile *Silent Hill F* (most likely a codename) is a spin-off telling a "completely new story" – in fact, it sounds like it's spun so far off as to not have much to do with *Silent Hill* at all, considering it's set in 1960s Japan. Developer Neobards, known for working on the still-upcoming *Resident Evil Re:Verse* multiplayer game, is taking the lead on this one.

Also announced was *Silent Hill Ascension* – some kind of interactive live event – and a new movie, Return to Silent Hill, from the director of the 2006 film.

I think series fans have reason to be cautious. A revival on this scale is exciting, but like its protagonists *Silent Hill* has more bad than good in its past. I'm not sure Konami has convinced me here that it's ready to buck that trend. The future of the series is foggy, but at this point it is nice to see that it has a future at all.

Robin Valentine

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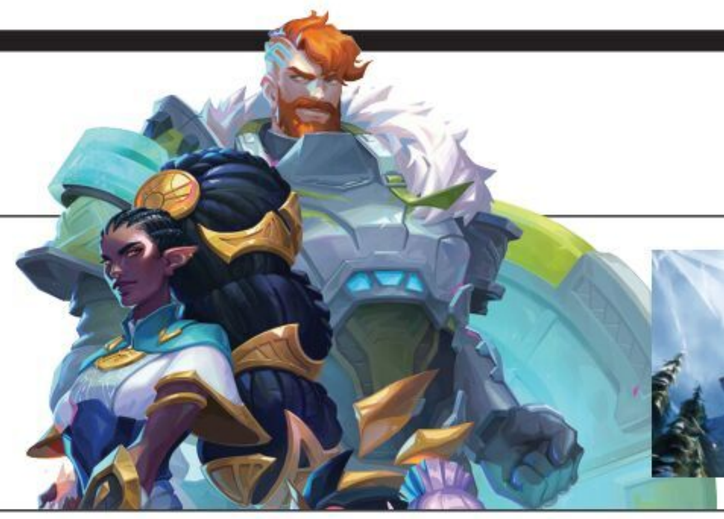
FUTURE

Evercore

ABOVE: Maps range from frozen tundras to cyberpunk cities.

RIGHT: You'll see traces of other teams, but won't interact with them directly.



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
2023	Vela Games	In-house	evercoreheroes.com

EVERCORE

Competitive PvE puts a macro-level twist on the MOBA

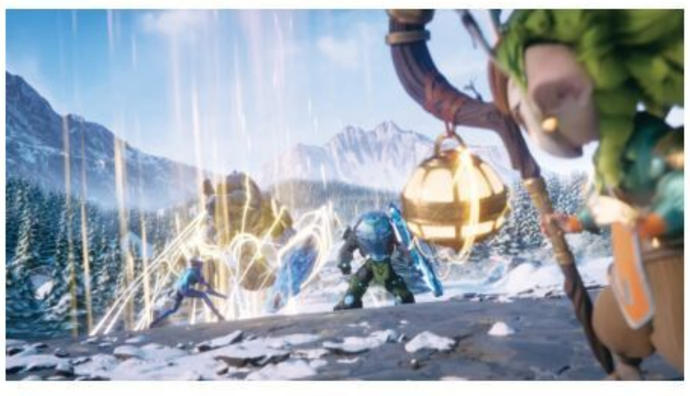
Our team of heroes huddles against a rock, hiding from the deadly blizzard that's swept into this arena. Dotted around the screen, our opponents do the same, each of the four teams of four taking shelter during this phase as they race to take down a towering troll boss.

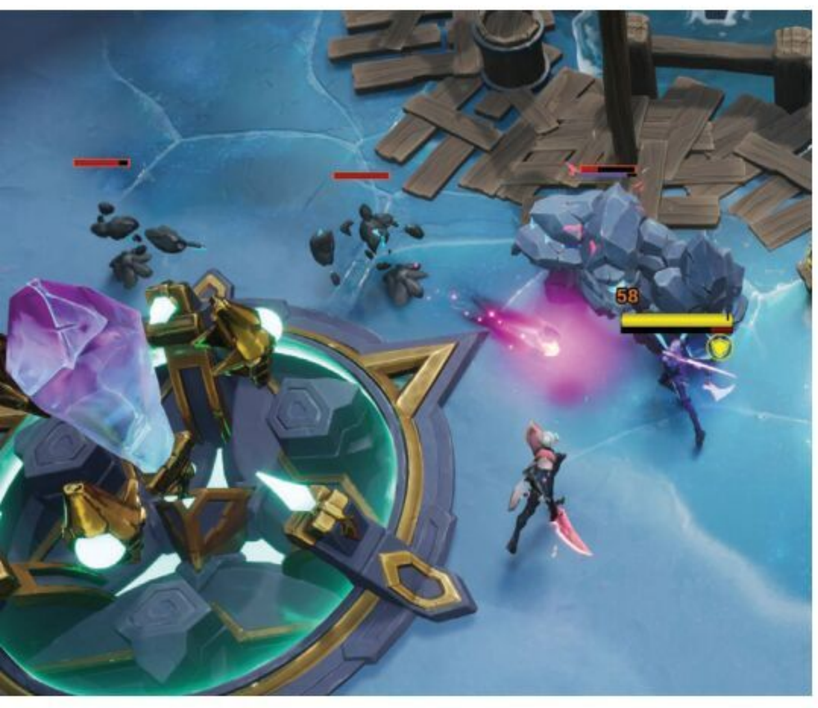
Only one group of heroes can claim the glory of being first to slay this intimidating beast, but the catch is that despite being in the same place at the same time, noone can see exactly how their opponents are holding up.

Evercore is the debut title from Vela Games, a studio headed up in part by two early *League of Legends* veterans. It subverts several key aspects of the MOBAs that helped inspire it. For a start, the focus on PvE over PvP is front and centre. Each term has a core that must be defended at all costs, but your primary foes are AI monsters, not other players. In fact, you'll barely even see an opponent – currently, opponents appear on your screen as little more than glowing orbs of light.

That's part of *Evercore*'s slant on competitive PvE. The game is a race, the first team to take down the final boss waiting at the end of each map emerging victorious, all other players left in their dust. Much like the 'World First' competition that overtake MMOs upon the arrival of a new raid, you'll know that your opponents are striving for the same goal, and may even be occupying the same spot as you on their own version of the game map to do so, but you won't be able to directly hinder their progress.

That's a key part of Vela's approach to keeping things civil in a genre famous for toxic interactions. The focus is on co-operation over dominance, but with a single misstep potentially leading to teams falling inexorably further and further behind, Vela has attempted to bake-in combat features that will allow players to catch-up. The devs acknowledge that "we can't solve human behaviour on the internet", but it's hoping that the central role that teamwork plays should alleviate many of the worst would-be griefers.





STARTING OUT, HEROES SCRAP WITH MUCH SMALLER MOBS, EARNING UPGRADES

FIRST LOOK

CORE EXERCISES

Evercore might be a race, but it's as much a test of efficiency as speed. Starting out, heroes scrap with much smaller mobs, earning upgrades that are crucial to taking down mini-bosses. Those little fights take place on the run, the monsters kited away from their spawn points to ensure no precious seconds are wasted on the way to more challenging fights. Much like the final showdown, only one team can take down each smaller boss, advancing with their own powerful upgrades.

That efficiency comes even further into play as each match progresses, and your heroes are pulled back and forth across the map, racing at one moment to another fight before being called to defend their core. Teams might choose to sacrifice a few precious seconds for the chance to slow down their opponents, going out of their way to dial up the difficulty of the next siege of their opponents' base. The entire game is a macro-level balancing act, the weighing up a number of approaches to increase your odds of victory.

It's that sheer breadth of possibilities hat makes *Evercore* so interesting. Even if one team seems to be racing ahead, it might take little more than one mistake or one piece of tactical brilliance to level the playing field. The focus on high-level tactics over individual skill expression could prove divisive in a world where flashy plays are king, but by zeroing in on a specific idea, *Evercore* might find its niche beneath the all-encompassing arms of the genre giants it's riffing off.

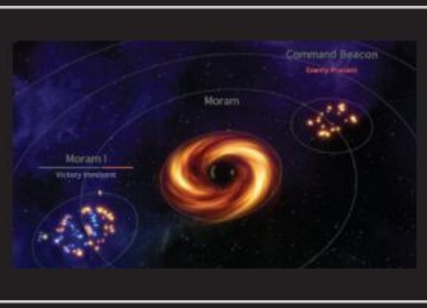
Alistair Jones

The Pegasus Expedition

ABOVE: Combat! And there are a number of strategies to choose from.

RIGHT: Toxic atmosphere, extreme day/night cycle, unstable magnetic field. Let's build a base!

The Pegasus Expedition



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THE PEGASUS EXPEDITION

An intriguing space 4X that needs time before it's ready to take flight

Stop me if you've heard this one before. An alien race is threatening Earth. Three major powers send fleets into space in the hope of finding a new home for humanity among the twinkling points of light in the night sky where it can thrive and build and frolic under alien suns.

What actually happens is that your fleet comes out of the wormhole in the Pegasus Galaxy (presumably UGC 12613 beloved of Stargate Atlantis fans) to find an unwelcoming star system surrounded by alien armadas. Yay!

The Pegasus Expedition is a 4X, placing you in command of a human faction, its leader making a rousing speech before blast off. Luckily, humans have jumpgate tech, so they can travel interstellar distances fairly easily, but they have little idea what's out there, and no plan. Oh, and they're thrust almost immediately into a war.

This is early demo code, but by the time you're reading this the game will be out in Early Access, and what's here now has issues. I appear to be in some sort of tutorial, though it makes little attempt to explain itself, bringing up buttons that don't work (except End Turn) and frustrating attempts to travel and build structures until I select a fleet and right-click a different solar system to the one I was orbiting within. This simple act, so obvious in hindsight, kick-starts the entire game into a cutscene and combat tutorial as if I hadn't already wasted six turns. It would have been nice to have some hint that this was the right thing to do, however, like a big flashing arrow.

UPON SPOTTING A SYSTEM HELD BY A THIRD FACTION, I WANT TO MOVE RIGHT IN

HORSING AROUND

I'm in charge of the European Union fleet, which means the head scientist wears a beret, and I go about my new corner of the galaxy spreading ideals of frictionless trade, a robust approach to non-members, and excellent bread. Unfortunately, the surrounding systems appear to be held by the Ror Clan, whose logo looks rather like that of the Klingon Empire and who follow a similar military doctrine. Which is to say that they shot first. I'm very much Greedo in this situation, to mix a sci-fi metaphor.

The Ror Clan appear hostile yet weak, so upon spotting a habitable system held by a third faction, I want to move right in. The Grand Admiral, however, attacks a 'buildable' but uninhabitable Ror system and I can do nothing about it. At this point, the Enter This System and Construction buttons that give access to a star's planets still don't work, so I'm stuck in the strategic view, repairing fleets and upgrading transit stations. This turns out to be part of the tutorial, with big flashing arrows still absent, and the game is waiting for me to fight more battles before allowing me into my own systems. Zokha has three hazardous planets and two buildable worlds, so I stick a research outpost on one.

PLAYED IT

Apparently we're now sending the Grand Admiral to a war council with our new allies. This plays out as a static dialogue scene, but some of the planets from the strategy map decide to pop in front, which means one character gets 'hazardous' written across his forehead. After this, the tutorial informs me that entering a system is now available.

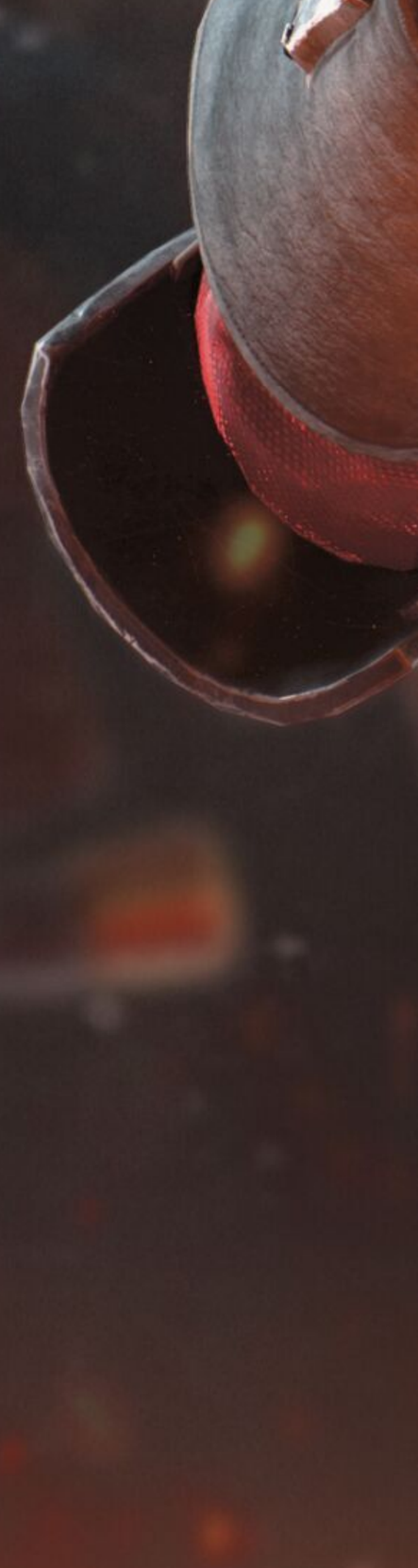
The 4X is a complex game, full of information tables and build queues that require gentle introduction and large flashing arrows to tell you what's what. There's nothing actually wrong with *The Pegasus Expedition* that a bit more development time and polish wouldn't fix. It's a nice looking game with a proven premise, it's just, at the moment, you can bounce off it harder than a micrometeorite off a toughened glass window.

Ian Evenden

Zooming right out gives you an idea of the space you're playing with.

Warhammer 40,000: Darktide

DARK FUTURE



In **WARHAMMER 40,000: DARKTIDE**, the salvation of Hive Tertium is in the hands of murderers and misfits

By Sean Martin

Warhammer 40,000: Darktide

hile browsing the gallery of convicts that form *Darktide*'s character creator, I can't help but be reminded how different the human perspective of Warhammer 40K is. For most people, the towering Space Marine is their touchstone for this setting, clad in immaculate MK IV plate armour, inscribed with battle honours, and adorned with fluttering oath papers. There's nothing of that here. The closest thing these rejects have are their tattoos; symbols of hive gangs or ex-Imperial Guard slogans etched in a shaky hand in the bowels of some prison ship, or the trenches of a forgotten warzone. This is the human reality of 40K, rarely seen beyond Black Library books, and I love that *Darktide* recognises that.

Another thing I really like is the shovel. The moment I see it in the Veteran's starting kit I burst out laughing, and Anders De Geer (game director) sitting next to me, smiles and nods knowingly. Like bayonets, trench shovels hold a special place in the heart of every 40K fan, and it's clear that Fatshark has revelled in bringing the setting's most iconic weapons to life.

As I swing my trusty shovel into the head of a charging Poxwalker, or use its alternate attack to jab at the enemies circling me, I could very well be playing the developer's previous co-op hit, *Vermintide*. That's what makes *Darktide* so dangerous.

"A lot of people watching the trailers are just like... this is *Vermintide*," says De Geer. "If people expect it to be *Vermintide*, will they be disappointed that it's not?" For me, that moment comes when, bloody shovel in hand, I charge up a flight of stairs to find a squad of furious heretic troopers aiming their lasguns at me. That's the moment it hits, along with a barrage of lasbolts: *Darktide* is not *Vermintide*.

Sure, you're still slaughtering hordes of enemies alongside your pals, and the melee combat is reminiscent of Fatshark's previous games, but in terms of setting, weapons, classes, squad roles, characters, and even narrative framing, *Darktide* is a different creature entirely. As I frantically back down the stairs against a storm of lasfire, I feel no disappointment. *Darktide* is a real challenge, and one that fans of 40K videogames have been waiting a long time for.

SMOOTH CRIMINALS

Unlike the established characters of *Vermintide*, *Darktide* is the rags-to-riches story of a Reject: a character you create who's been imprisoned and co-opted into what writer Dan Abnett calls "the largest inquisitorial operation we've ever seen". You're one insignificant soldier in a massive army of convicts sent to liberate Atoma Prime. You choose your appearance, backstory, and from multiple voices and personalities, each of which narrates a wonderful perspective on their unfortunate lot in life. That said, the shift from established characters to created ones is more than just a roleplaying element.

"There are always multiple people who prefer to play Kerilian or Bardin, and they always have to compromise, like who gets to play their favourite this time?" explains De Geer. "We want to let people play whoever they want, whenever they want."

It's a clever reversal on Fatshark's part, shifting the preference from specific characters to that of a specific squad role. You can always play the character you created, but the question now is, what do you want them to do? Squad roles play a

BELOW: Anders De Geer, *Darktide's* game director at Fatshark.

DARKTIDE IS MORE ABOUT SQUAD MEMBERS AND THEIR ABILITY TO COPE WITH SPECIFIC THREATS

huge part in *Darktide*; your shield recharges when you're close to your allies, you have an aura that grants them buffs, and that's not mentioning the countless new perils you'll need backup to contend with in Tertium.

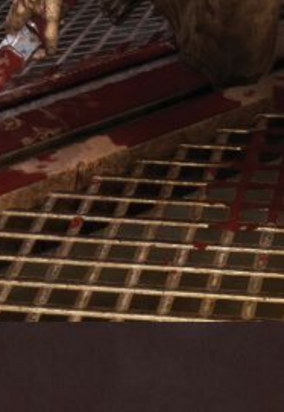
Unlike *Vermintide*, where you could play solo if you knew how to avoid getting grabbed by special enemies, *Darktide* is more about squad members and their ability to cope with specific threats. Your

THE MOEBIAN SIXTH

Turn back the tide of traitor guardsmen

GRENADIERS

Among *Darktide*'s peskiest specials, these sappers hurl incendiary grenades at your feet before fleeing. Chase them down if you don't want to cook alive.



FLAMERS

A green gout of promethium usually announces the presence of a flamer. Make some space and pick them off before they have a chance to light up.

MAULERS

Maulers wear heavy armour and wield deadly chainaxes. Keep them at a distance and sidestep their slower strikes before hitting them in the head.

RANGED ELITES

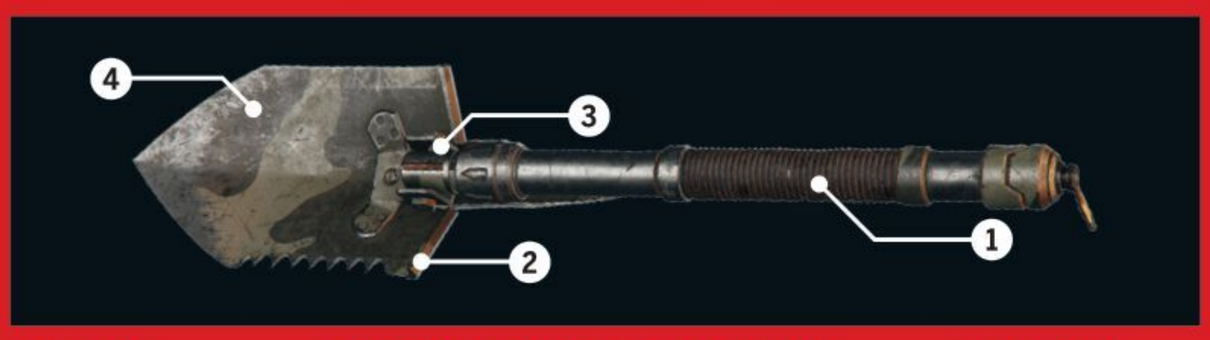
If you spy a ranged elite, get behind something fast. The safest way to deal with them is to suppress them with ranged fire before hitting their position.

WEAPONS ADD A FURTHER LEVEL OF COMPLEXITY TO THIS WITH ALTERNATE ATTACKS

Zealot can charge into melee and trade blows, but they might struggle to deal with ranged enemies. A Veteran, on the other hand, might be effective at picking off snipers or armoured enemies, but far less capable in close quarters. “The ground rules are still the same. Everyone should have the ability to do something in all situations,” says Mats Andersson, lead combat designer. “But where you see *Vermintide* lean more into covering all your bases, the contrast is pushing *Darktide* more into co-op play, where if you specialise in this,

A GUARDSMAN’S BEST FRIEND

The standard-issue munitorum shovel



1 HANDY
No matter how many times you entrench it in the head of a heretic, this patented grip will make sure your shovel stays firmly in hand.

2 CUSTOMISABLE
While any damage to Munitorum property will be deducted from your earnings, a tweak may bolster your shovel’s efficiency.

3 FOLDABLE
For the guardsman on-the-go, a folding joint will let you stow your shovel with speed, ready for ambushes or close quarters combat.

4 DIG FOR VICTORY
In the rare likelihood you are directed to use your shovel for digging report to a sergeant for instruction in dirt exhumation practices.

and I specialise in that, we can solve this thing together, because it tightens the bond and the tactical experience of it."

"We've always talked in *Vermintide* about making sure that everyone has their time to shine," De Geer adds. "How to create situations where a particular loadout is preferable. In *Darktide* I think we've tightened that up."

Weapons add a further level of complexity to this with alternate attacks and firing modes. For some, like the combat axe, you get a quick disembowelling uppercut, but others such as the lasgun provide a torch that will actually be useful in some of Hive Tertium's darker areas. The thunder hammer can unleash a charged strike that's effective for single targets, but you need to work it into the rhythm of your regular swings. Suppression, too, is a new mechanic that's required to pin down ranged enemies so you can bring them into melee – a significant departure from *Vermintide*'s ammo economy.

ABOVE: You can kit out your Rejects with an arsenal of weapons, from flamers to chainswords.

However, the overall result is a game that feels far more reactive than *Vermintide*, as you juggle threats among your squad. The Psyker, for example, is immensely satisfying to play, since they can use their warp witchery to explode enemy heads after a short charge, making them effective at picking off pesky specials. As Mats describes it, it's choosing a target and hiding in a cupboard until their brains pop.

Where each character grabs grenades from an ammunition box, the Ogryn picks up the box itself, and hurls the hilariously small projectile with its massive hand. Alongside the stellar voice acting performances, it's little touches like these that add identity to *Darktide*'s roster of misfits, while also supporting the complexity of its new features.

INTO THE HIVE

It's clear playing *Darktide* how much care and attention has been lavished on the creation of its setting: Atoma Prime and the hive city, Tertium. Working alongside Fatshark and Games Workshop, Black Library author Dan Abnett has helped slice off a little corner of the Imperium for *Darktide* to use. With his popular Gaunt's Ghosts and Eisenhorn novels, Abnett is no stranger to establishing his own settings within 40K, and has created some of the most iconic human stories in the lore. But even though Abnett has developed a long history for Atoma Prime, which has been inhabited since before the Great Crusade, you don't have to be lore hungry to enjoy the setting.

"We have this enormous asset, in as much as, even a standard citizen who has grown up in the Imperium, and is not just logging on to play today, knows very little," says Abnett. "The ignorance level is so staggering that the revelations of backstory and history that we may present as the game goes along are going to be new for them as well. There are points I know we're going to get to where we'll have to introduce things to the character, let alone the actual player."

Darktide is a great entry point to 40K, focusing more on visual storytelling than blunt exposition. To paraphrase Abnett, Tertium is a living, working hive, and that allows you to see it in terms of its function. Some of *Darktide*'s most unique areas are built with this in mind. The Torrent for example, is a zone where constant acid rain leaks from the hive above and a cartel collects and sells it to residents as water. The Hourglass – *Darktide*'s only outside area – is a desert zone where the towering hive wall has collapsed and locals sluice the sand spilling in to find metal for the manufactories.

"The people of this world have strip-mined it systematically for thousands of years, so there are virtually no minerals left," explains Abnett. "What they're doing now is extracting from the waste product of what they originally extracted from the surface. The idea that we're now just straining our own waste to find things to use, to me, is typical 40K. We can get that across to the player by giving them acres of text to read, or we can just show them."

Lead combat designer Mats Andersson, in amongst some Warhammer terrain,

Warhammer 40,000: Darktide

Darktide focuses on what Abnett calls the "dystopian human experience" of 40K, in which a Space Marine is "something bigger and brighter than you and also the thing you're praying will arrive to help". In many ways it feels like a continuation of *Vermintide*'s relatable heroes, who always had a very human side, but were never the strongest characters in the setting. That said, considering the amount of work that has gone into developing its foundation, I'm excited to see how the ongoing story of Hive Tertium unfolds.

"This is a ruinous planet, and we're concentrating on one very, very complex part of it. But who knows what's happened? Who knows why some of these bits are ruined, for instance, or what else is out there? There's so much we can explore. I certainly know there are things there that nobody knows about yet," says Abnett. "I think it's got that kind of longevity, where, like any good Inquisitorial investigation, the deeper you go, the more there is to find."

WAR ETERNAL

For its developers, *Darktide* also represents a shift in storytelling, and with it, a reassessment of how best to deliver content to players. While the *Vermintide* games were firmly rooted in the past as you retold the exploits of the Ubersreik Five, *Darktide*'s narrative will evolve alongside the player, as the conflict in Hive Tertium escalates and unfolds. Abnett describes Atoma Prime as a "venue of interesting things"; not all of which will necessarily see the light of day, but that can be called upon when needed. In this way, *Darktide* has a massive amount of potential as a platform for content beyond launch.

"I hate the phrase 'live service', because it means so many different things, but we're realising that our fans want continuous updates," says De Geer. "*Vermintide* was pretty much launched as a traditional game. We did a few DLC packs, but we had more of an old-school mindset back then. For *Vermintide 2* we had a slightly different approach and turned to live service more towards the end. This time around we tried to think about it in terms of: this is happening right now. If we want to change stuff or players don't like things, we can always update them, and create new situations tied into the narrative or tied into classes."

Andersson describes it in simpler terms: "A cool list of shit that we want to add to the game." This list includes classes, a range of weapon choices that hasn't even "scratched the surface" of 40K, and De Geer even talks about the possibility of a hardcore mode in which any death would end your run. "I just want to see streamers play it," Anders laughs. "People would have to play it in a completely different way, like they'd have to approach every situation so carefully. Stuff like that would be hilarious to do in the future."

While throwing ideas around, Anders also mentions that "by lore" they could add alien weapons to the game, since Inquisitors are allowed to use them. The possibility of a cyborg Skitarii character is also mentioned.

BELOW: The Fatshark team's real passion for tabletop Warhammer shines through in their videogames.

"Or orks?" suggests Andersson (an ork player). "The design brain becomes happy when you've managed to get a system that kind of effortlessly allows you to design new things. It's like, 'Let's do a chef class! He can be an Imperial Guard Veteran who was in the food corp!"

Alongside the addition of new classes, De Geer also confirms that the actual ongoing campaign narrative for *Darktide* won't appear in the form of paid DLC, "We don't want to split the community, and we don't want people to be at different stages of the story."

As I swing my shovel yet again and send another heretic cartwheeling away in a spray of gore, I start to realise that it's kind of a perfect summary of what *Darktide* is. As a loyal soldier of the Imperium, you used this shovel across countless battlefields, to stave in the heads of heretics, cook food, and sometimes even dig. You know how it feels, its heft, and every scratch and scrape that populates its surface. That said, it's an artefact

“WHO KNOWS WHY SOME OF THESE BITS ARE RUINED, OR WHAT ELSE IS OUT THERE?”

from a life that doesn’t exist anymore. You’re a prisoner of the Inquisition now, and as you’re dropped into the choking darkness of Hive Tertium with nothing but a gun, your overalls, and your trusty old shovel, you have to quickly adapt to these new circumstances. No matter how familiar it feels in the hand, *Darktide* is a new reality, and you either adjust to it, or... well, you know the rest. That said, you’re far from the only misfit on Atoma Prime looking for redemption.

Darktide is the best co-op action game I’ve played in years, but it also has the potential to grow into one of the best Warhammer 40K games ever made. You can play it for yourself on November 30. ■

HIVE TERTIUM

The sprawling capital of Atoma Prime

THE TORRENT

Named for the ‘rain’ that leaks from the levels above. When Chaos arrived, the water-hoarding cartel was assimilated. Now they flood the hive with tainted water.

MANUFACTORIES

Deep below the surface of Hive Tertium, the furnace-like factories burn day and night, smelting metals to build Leman Russ tanks for the Imperial War effort.

THE HOURGLASS

This district of shanty towns lies beneath a broken section of the Hive wall. Now sand spills into the level along with anything that dwells on Atoma Prime’s surface.

HOW WE REVIEW

We review each game on its own merits, and try to match it to a reviewer who's a passionate expert in the field. The main aim of reviews is to help you make buying decisions. To this end, we're selective about what we review, and try to focus on the notable, interesting, exciting or surprising.

DOWNLOADABLE CONTENT

DLC might be new missions for a game, or it might be a single new item. If we think you want to know about it, we'll review it.

EARLY ACCESS

Any released alpha, beta, or otherwise unfinished game that you can currently pay for. For these games, we won't assign a score, but we will tell you whether they're worth your time.

THEY'RE BACK

Whenever there's a bargain or re-release of a significant game, our expert will revisit it and tell you whether it holds up today. With jokes.

OUR SCORING SYSTEM EXPLAINED

00%-09% Broken or offensively bad; absolutely no value.
Example *Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude*

10%-19% We might be able to find one nice thing to say about it, but still not worth anyone's time or money.
Example *Gettysburg: Armored Warfare*

20%-29% Completely falls short of its goals. Very few redeeming qualities.
Examples *Family Guy: Back to the Multiverse*

30%-39% An entirely clumsy or derivative effort. There's little reason to play this game over a similar, better one.
Examples *Trials of the Blood Dragon*

40%-49% Flawed and disappointing.
Examples *Aliens: Colonial Marines*

50%-59% Mediocre. Other games probably do it better, or its unique qualities aren't executed well.
Examples *Primordia, Homefront: The Revolution*

60%-69% There's something to like here, but it can only be recommended with major caveats.
Examples *No Man's Sky, Ghost Recon: Wildlands*

70%-79% A good game that's worth playing. We like it.
Examples *Prey, NieR: Automata*

80%-89% A great game with exceptional moments or features, and touches of brilliance. We love it.
Examples *Overwatch, Night in the Woods*

90%-94% A compelling recommendation for most PC gamers. Important to PC gaming, and likely ahead of its time.
Examples *Bayonetta, Dishonored 2*

95%-96% Far and away one of the best games we've ever played. We recommend it to the entire world.
Examples *Half-Life 2, Kerbal Space Program*

97%-100% Advances the human species. Boosts the immune systems of nearby children and small animals.

PC PowerPlay EDITOR'S CHOICE

The Editor's Choice award is granted in addition to the score, at the discretion of the PC PowerPlay staff. It represents exceptional quality or innovation.

It begins...

We've now officially entered the busiest quarter of the year for games. Though it's been a quiet, strange year for games, I still find myself struggling to fit everything in an issue, with more difficult choices to be made next month.

Even after nearly a decade in this industry, and longer as a dedicated PC gamer, I don't think I've ever quite worked out how to approach this time of year. If I try feverishly to keep up, I end up getting only a brief taste of each game, far from the full experience. If I concentrate on just a few, then the zeitgeist (not to mention our GOTY discussions) passes me by, and I'm left playing 2022's best game in February. I call it Valentine's Paradox, and I propose scientists start work immediately on some kind of time-travel based solution.

Robin

ROBIN VALENTINE

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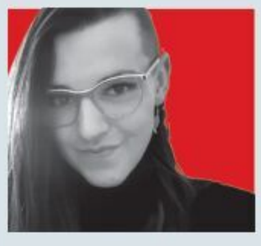
THEY'RE BACK

76 Bayonetta
77 **Broken Sword 2: The Smoking Mirror**
77 Shank

This month's rat-tastic reviewers...

TED LITCHFIELD
Specialist in
Weird textures
Currently playing
Scorn
This month
Played a game about body horror, but came away more disturbed by the checkpoints.

TYLER COLP
Specialist in
Déjà vu
Currently playing
Overwatch 2
This month
Sick of remakes and remasters, Tyler reviewed a proper sequel. Waitaminute!



SAMANTHA GREER
Specialist in
Infernal affairs
Currently playing
Hyper Demon
This month
Conquered Hell with her knife hands. Not out of character.

FRASER BROWN
Specialist in
Tiny combat
Currently playing
Grounded
This month
Saw life as a bug-sized person – almost a whole foot shorter than he is in real life!

TOM SYKES
Specialist in
Horsing around
Currently playing
Card Cowboy
This month
Couldn't even flog a dead horse. Sometimes writing about games is hard.

THE SQUEAKQUEL

A PLAGUE TALE: REQUIEM gets all its rats in a row

By Jon Bailes

Never work with children or animals, the old showbiz adage goes. And while the sentiment doesn't usually stretch to games, it's a brave developer who would place an impulsive five year old at the centre of a harrowing action adventure, or try to construct logical systems atop a horde of ravenous rats. Yet Asobo Studio managed exactly that with *A Plague Tale: Innocence*, and its bold sequel raises the stakes with an even defter touch.

Despite the unorthodox casting of its beasts and youngsters, *Innocence* largely worked within boundaries set by bigger names, most notably *The Last of Us*. *Requiem*, by contrast, feels like a spread of the wings, buoyed by its predecessor's success to forge an unmistakable identity.

In terms of production values among comparable titles, it still bows before Sony heavyweights such as *The Last of Us Part II* and *God of War*, but little else. And most importantly it grows outward from the elements that shined in the original – the palpable texture of its medieval setting, the pathos in its character relationships, and the persistent menace of the rats. By building everything up around that core, *Requiem* is often more compelling and relatable than its celebrated peers.

It's not long before you're knee deep in slurry and rodents

This tale begins with the survivors from the first game travelling south through France to escape the scar of the rat plague that swallowed up their home region. Teenager Amicia De Rune – the player character – and her little brother Hugo are starting to enjoy life once again, frolicking in lush fields and pretending to storm an abandoned castle. Meanwhile, the children's mother and her apprentice Lucas are more concerned about getting Hugo checked out by a renowned alchemist, since the rats are after all linked to a curse in his blood, and nobody wants them showing their little furry faces again.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
The sequel to 2019's A Plague Tale: Innocence, an action adventure starring two young siblings and a swarm of killer rats

EXPECT TO PAY
$69

DEVELOPER
Asobo Studio

PUBLISHER
Focus Entertainment

REVIEWED ON
RTX 2070, i7-10750H, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
asobostudio.com/games/plague-tale-requiem

DE RUNE WITH A VIEW

Naturally, the group's fortunes soon takes a turn for the worse, and it's not long before you're knee deep in slurry, cadavers, and beady-eyed rodents. "Nothing ever stays nice," Hugo says, succinctly. *Requiem* excels in these contrasts, though, flooding the screen with vibrant joys one minute, despair the next. Innocence had moments of colour and hope too, but the Provencal and Mediterranean settings in this odyssey are blessed with sunshine, searingly green countryside, and contented peasants. An early market scene embodies this spirit as well as anything, with rich yellow dyes and hot red spices adding extra warmth to the faces of joyous traders, which makes it all the more awful when things go bad.

It's not only the views but also the characters that drive the mood. Young Hugo is the star here, and his shifts of disposition from playful innocence, simply fascinated by the world, to quivering fear or destructive tantrum set the tempo of the game. That the script handles these transitions so coherently is a minor miracle, while the back and

ABOVE: Sometimes all you can do is run for your life.

Long grass is good for hiding, but can also be set on fire.

forth chatter between he and Amicia or other companions expertly reinforces the bonds between them. Your role as Hugo's protector, clinging on to his hand with sweaty intensity, torn between love and the weight of responsibility, is beautifully realised.

TOP: With views like this, it's tempting to jump into photo mode.

RIGHT: Character faces are once again highly realistic up close.

OF RATS AND MEN

As ever, when trouble does arrive, it comes in two flavours – people and rats. The former are always up to no good, of course, especially the powerful ones, and an unpleasant confrontation leads to fresh trauma for Hugo, which triggers the plague once more. You'll thus be cracking heads with rocks from Amicia's sling before you know it, hunted by soldiers and mercenaries, while the dark swarm starts chewing through a picturesque city, and can only be kept at bay with light and fire. Indeed, after only a few chapters of *Requiem*, many of the systems drip fed into the first game have already returned, leaving a large part of the adventure to explore new territory.

With all this extra room to develop, many human encounters (with or without rats), become stealth sandboxes, peppered with hiding spots, vantage points, and shortcuts. These are more expansive than their equivalents in *Innocence*, and gift you more material to work with. Once again, you collect ingredients to craft into throwable

CIRCLE OF VIOLENCE *What to craft and how to use it*

ROCKS
Amicia carries rocks in her pocket, great for breaking chains or skulls.

IGNIFER
The fire starter, essential when rats are around or for acts of pyromania.

EXTINGUIS
Can blind guards or put out their torches, leaving them open to rat attack.

TAR
Add to fire to increase its intensity, or throw on the ground then ignite for a pool of flame.

ODORIS
Creates a scent that attracts rats towards enemies or just the hell away from you.

ABOVE LEFT: Carts are often a useful way of reaching higher platforms.

ABOVE: The sling shot is no good against helmeted foes – best to go around.

chemical compounds, such as fire starters, extinguishers, and rat bait, but it's easier to locate and combine what you need. You can also quickly switch between throwing these compounds, firing them from the sling, placing them in a ceramic pot to create an area of effect missile, and eventually attaching them to the end of a crossbow bolt. Different methods are required to distract, stun, blind, or kill foes, depending on the type of armour and weapons they're equipped with. While these options never quite match the emergent potentials of an immersive sim, there's always a lingering sense at the end of a section that you could have done things differently.

TOOL ASSISTED

At the same time, items such as pots, bolts and quick-kill knives are in limited supply, so you can't over rely on your most powerful tools (knives in particular are best saved, since they can also prise the rusted locks off hidden treasure chests).

You also need to decide when to call on the specific skills of companion characters, whether that's Lucas, Hugo, or one of the new faces that join your group. In Hugo's case that can even mean taking control of small packs of rats, then moving them from a rodent's eye view as they tear through a scene munching anyone unfortunate enough to be in the way.

NEW TRICKS

Amicia learns new skills depending on your style of play

PRUDENCE
Stay stealthy and Amicia will learn to move more quietly, then creep around faster, and even adopt a more effective throwing stance.

AGGRESSION
The assassin's choice, offering new methods for quick kills, such as pushing enemies into the rats, and faster recovery from injury.

OPPORTUNISM
For the would-be alchemist. Craft faster and more efficiently, and eventually gain equipment upgrade materials in the process.

As for the rats, when it's just you and them, they're still in effect a part of the game's environmental puzzles, and function quite mechanically. They're like a living sea of lava, albeit one that can be shifted and shaped to some extent by carving out paths of light. The challenge for *Requiem* was always going to be keeping them intimidating, given how much *Innocence* had us exploit their predictable behaviour. To an extent it succeeds by increasing the numbers, having them erupt in tsunamis that crash through stone walls with a momentum that might even swamp and choke out valuable light sources. Toying with them can also feel more dangerous, as you might push them away temporarily, only for them to teem back as you enter what you mistakenly thought was safe ground.

The real force of *Requiem*, though, doesn't come from any one component, more its constant motion. As situations evolve, it adds fresh ways you can interact with scenes, whether that's through new tools, different allies that tilt the tenor of encounters more towards stealth or combat, or occasional set pieces that serve up a different problem altogether. A scene where you're faced with a falconer and his deadly bird, for instance, has you creating brief distractions then zipping to the next cover point, while another has you working a crossbow turret picking off charging soldiers.

STEALTH AND SAFETY

Still, there are drawbacks to all this ambition. Because the systems are broader and more organic, they have more opportunity to clash with bizarre and unreasonable results. Chucking explosive pots around or moving rats as Hugo can cause complications, as straggling predators end up in unexpected spots that you shouldn't be able to access. Partner characters, meanwhile, can get stuck on scenery (especially Lucas for some reason), and the larger ones have a habit of getting in your way with their additional bulk. A case of never work with adults.

Having them erupt in tsunamis that crash through stone walls

More generally, stealth sections can be a little pernickety, with too many lines of sight to keep track of. It's an issue because once you've been seen you may as well reload the last checkpoint and go again, which can tend towards trial and error. Also, if you get frustrated by a series of such mistakes in the same area, it's often easier to quietly kill everyone rather than make an effort with stealth at all, which always seems a bit of a cop out. "I don't like it, but I always end up having to do it," Amicia explains to one of her companions after setting light to an unaware victim. You may well feel the same.

Nevertheless, it's hard to begrudge *Requiem* this unevenness when so much it does lands exactly as intended, and even in stealth sections, when you do make it through in a clean take, it can be wonderfully gratifying to sneak through the large metal door that heralds a moment of safety. Frustrations fade away in the scope of a full-spectrum action adventure that shifts gear into exciting chases, then cerebral puzzles and teamwork, confidently keeping hold of your attention for almost 20 hours.

But perhaps the most effective example of this confidence comes in the second half of the game, when it releases the throttle for a while to let you leisurely explore a Mediterranean island, a paradise of bougainvillea petals, chiming cicadas and creeping afternoon heat. The aim here is merely to spend quality time with your characters. At one point Hugo spots a tower and decides he wants to climb it. Why? Just because towers are fun to climb. It's a pleasing reminder that beneath all the death and squalor survives the wide-eyed awe of adventure, which remains at the heart of *A Plague Tale: Requiem* even once it darkens again and rolls towards a touching finale. And so the game takes us through the heights and depths of human experience, by not only daring to work with children and animals, but letting them run the show. ■

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

A Plague Tale: Requiem **is a masterful sequel and an exceptional action adventure. Vive la rate!**

85

RIGHT: You get to take a sea voyage, although not much happens.

GIGER COUNTER

Will you help the Nasty Man escape from Sphincter Island in SCORN?

By Ted Litchfield

In my favourite moment, late in *Scorn*, you transition from the industrial underbelly of this forgotten civilisation to its alien and terrifying, yet also still somehow mournful, regal capital. The entire game up until now you've seen the gruesome brown machinery of this ancient people churning and grinding to do something, ripping familiarly human-like beings apart, sometimes while they're still alive, for some unknowable purpose.

Here in the Polis, you see a decaying cathedral adorned with colossal statues of these same beings, some taking heroic poses, others cradling red, glowing wombs, and many of them copulating. How did this civilisation digest the contradiction in how it represented itself versus how it treated its people?

This grey cathedral bathed in lilac light was the part of the game that most reminded me of the work of Zdzisław Beksinski, a Polish artist who "wished to paint as if [he] were photographing dreams" and is cited alongside xenomorph creator HR Giger as one of *Scorn*'s primary inspirations. The striking visual feast of the alien capital, accompanied by a mournful audio track, practically moved me to tears. It was so strange and wonderful, and seemed to hint at some greater mystery at the heart of the game's proceedings.

It always feels like I'm just barely making it by the skin of my teeth

An hour into the subsequent level, *Scorn* bugged out and I had to restart the chapter. You can't manually save, and the game's more generous regular checkpoints are only accessible through player death – from the main menu, you can only load into the start of a chapter, or occasional halfway point markers. I speedran the parts of the chapter I'd already beaten, yada yada ancient people, yada yada unknowable purpose, beat the modicum of game I had left to play after that and rolled credits. The technical hiccup and frustrating runback at this crucial moment really killed my buzz. I think *Scorn* is a genuinely great work of sci-fi, but it vexes me sometimes.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A first-person, atmospheric horror-shooter thing inspired by the art of HR Giger and Zdzisław Beksinski

EXPECT TO PAY
$59

DEVELOPER
Ebb Software

PUBLISHER
Kepler Interactive

REVIEWED ON
Core i5 12600K, RTX 3070, 32 GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
No

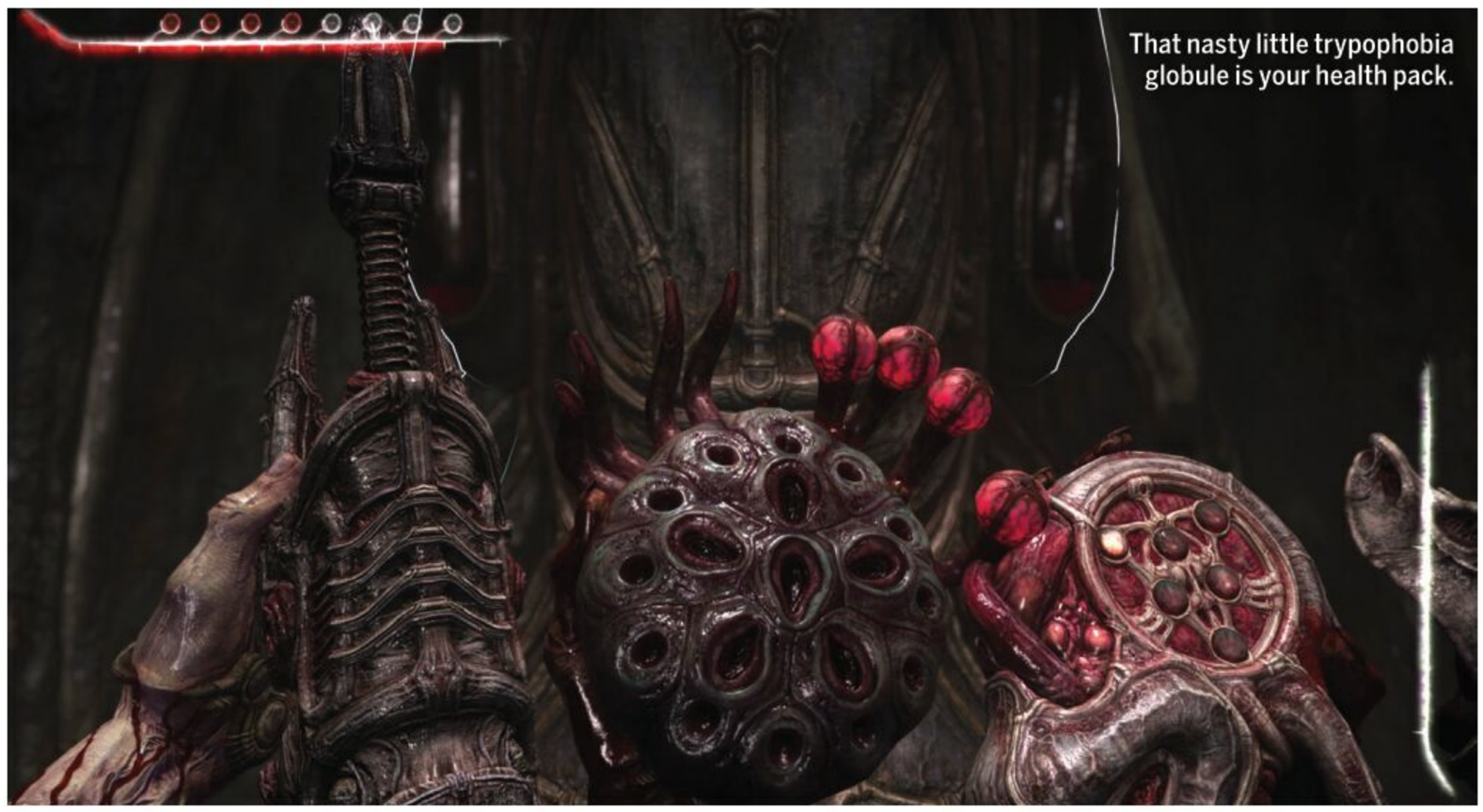
LINK
ebbsoftware.com

SCORN IDENTITY

The core gameplay loop reminds me most of *Portal,* or even a more gruesome take on *Myst*. You enter a new area and have to slowly pick your way through, soaking up the creepy ambience and sussing out the function of the various grotesquely biological apparatuses left behind by this lost civilisation. *Scorn*'s protagonist looks to be a member of that civilisation, maybe the last one left after everyone else went to the body horror Rapture.

Scorn's combat is reminiscent of a classic *Resident Evil*. You move very slowly, enemies hit hard, and more than two facing you at once is overwhelming. The bread and butter of your arsenal is a phallic melee plunger thing that has to cool off every two shots, though you later gain access to other gross weapons too. I enjoy *Scorn*'s combat, if enjoy is the right word. It's tense like old-school survival horror, and it always feels like I'm just barely making it by the skin of my teeth as I

TOP: This portion absolutely broke my heart.



That nasty little trypophobia globule is your health pack.

ABOVE: Some areas have seen a fungal infestation.

hustle to avoid attacks, weaving close to these weird flesh monsters to bop them with my penis gun.

Unfortunately, that punishing combat definitely exacerbates those checkpoint woes I mentioned. Before that glitch in the last level harshed my profound, cosmic horror vibe, I also lost about an hour and a half of playtime partway through the game. After a long *Scorn* sesh ending with a real bastard of a puzzle, I died and respawned just a few minutes prior. Loading back into the game later, I discovered I had to redo the entire preceding chapter, puzzle and all. I feel like a reasonable developer-side solution would be to have a single rolling checkpoint save slot accessible from the load menu.

Checkpoint shenanigans, short runtime, and all, I think *Scorn* is worth the price. It's striking, unique, and it doesn't overstay its welcome. *Scorn* could have certainly worked as a lower-fi, *Haunted* PS1-style project, but its commitment to the grotesque genuinely benefits from high-end, modern rendering. I'm hopeful its checkpoint pain can be alleviated with a patch and, above all, it's a type of game I'd only like to see more of. ■

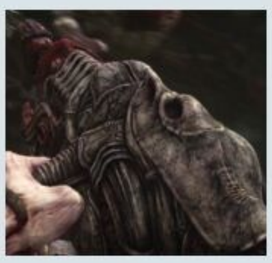
PC PowerPlay VERDICT

Checkpoint woes and a short runtime couldn't keep this body horror sci-fi game from burrowing into my skull.

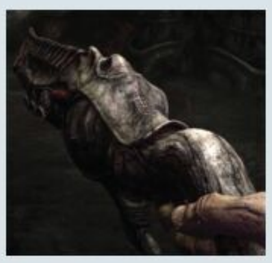
80

SQUICK SHOT

Nothing untoward at all about these very normal firearms...



THE BIG BOPPER
The penis gun I mentioned. It feels like something the Joker would use to bop someone from around the corner.



THE PISSTOL
Your classic pea shooter. It perhaps leaves something to be desired, but at least it's not just a boring Glock.

COMPENSATING FOR SOMETHING
Basically a slug shotgun. Ammo is scarce, so it's best reserved for *Scorn*'s beefiest mooks.

THE GOB-LOBBER
Only *Scorn* would be so cruel as to give you a grenade launcher at such a late stage and at such great cost.

STEALING YOUR HEART

Turn-based RPGs take a knee, **PERSONA 5 ROYAL** is your king

By Oscar Taylor-Kent

My team of anime mind-thieves deftly jump across chandeliers, then take cover to avoid the gaze of a patrolling guard in the corridor that follows, zig-zagging behind him to initiate an ambush. As the jazzy soundtrack reminds me, he never saw it coming, and taking advantage of the weakness of the demon who lives inside him we tag-team attacks to wipe it out in seconds.

It's the kind of dynamism you might not expect from a turn-based JRPG, but *Persona 5 Royal* is fine with bucking tradition to execute this near-flawless adventure. Even now, a few years since its original release, this is the genre's pinnacle.

Despite being later to the heist on PC, this is an excellent version – perhaps the best one on the market. While clearly intended for controller play, keyboard and mouse support adds a nice, direct layer to this largely slow-paced, tactical affair. Graphical options are limited, but get the job done, and the option to play with 120fps – as well as 30 and 60fps options – adds to *P5R*'s slick vibe.

That fluidity and sense of style permeates every layer of *P5R*, which seemingly has an answer for every reason players might be bored of the genre. Its combat is comfortable operating in both an arcadey mode that has you chaining together weaknesses to clear boards almost like a puzzle game, and boss fights that require a thorough use of its toolset. Its story of teenagers rebelling against an unjust world of adults in modern day Tokyo feels refreshing in its parallels to our world. Its main dungeons are far cries from straightforward corridors, instead featuring environments worthy of exploration as you scoop up shinies.

You play as a teenager with an unjustly earned rap sheet

LOOTY CALLS

The treasure you'll be picking up goes beyond gold trinkets to sell back at the equipment shop. You'll be stealing hearts – quite literally. You play as a teenager with an unjustly earned rap sheet, carted off to start anew with a family friend, enrolling in Tokyo's Shujin Academy. Discovering a strange phone app that refuses to be deleted, you end up involved in another case of an adult abusing their authority. The school's gym teacher is both injuring the volleyball team he teaches through cruel training, while also treating the girls in his care as sex objects. It's gross, and the game goes to great lengths to make the complicated mental toll of that kind of abuse clear.

The app, the Metaverse Navigator, allows users to enter the shared consciousness of Tokyo, where particularly nasty individuals who wield influence have grotesque palaces. Guarded by demons, it's a deathtrap for your average passerby. But you (and later your friends), are able to draw on that demonic power for yourself by reckoning with the mask society has forced you to wear, dramatically tearing it off to evoke your persona in battle.

Awakening to the power also decks you out in the duds of a

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Teen angst mind heists in the slickest turn-based JRPG you'll ever play

EXPECT TO PAY
TBC

DEVELOPER
Atlus

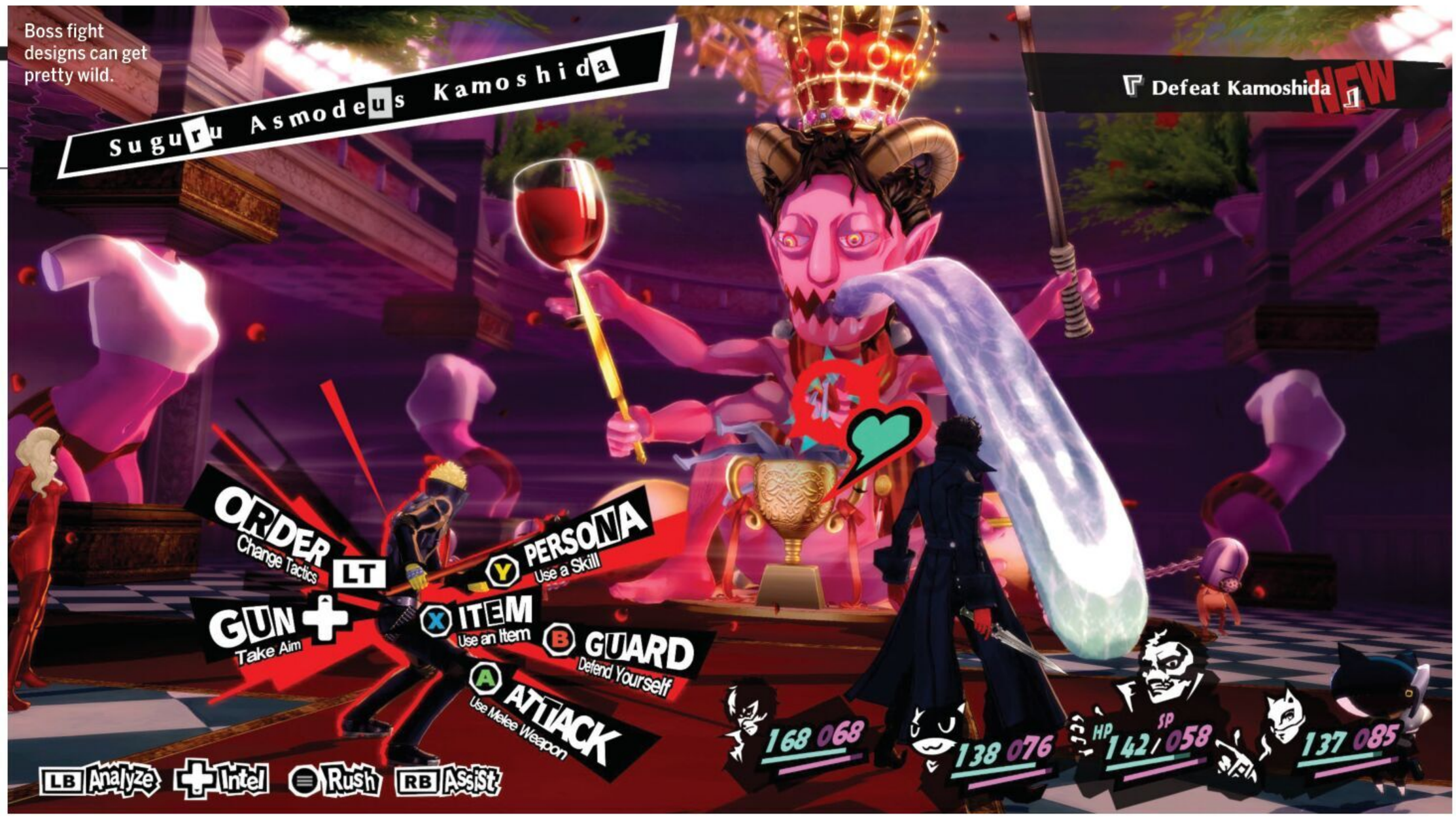
PUBLISHER
SEGA

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 7 1700X, Gigabyte RTX 2080 Super, 32Gb RAM

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
persona.atlus.com/p5r

RIGHT: Adults suck. Thankfully, the Phantom Thieves actually have the tools to do something about it.



ABOVE: Even demons can be held up with guns.

modern-day gentleman thief, after which you take on the codename Joker to match your long leather coat and gloves. Having to publicly call out the teacher to manifest the treasure of his heart so you can abscond with it, you and your pals take the name The Phantom Thieves. After successfully getting away with it – which results in him admitting to his crimes and resigning – the crew decides to press on for a whole JRPG's worth of adventures, each dungeon a new mind-heist through some of the most devious brains in the city, with a new theme to match.

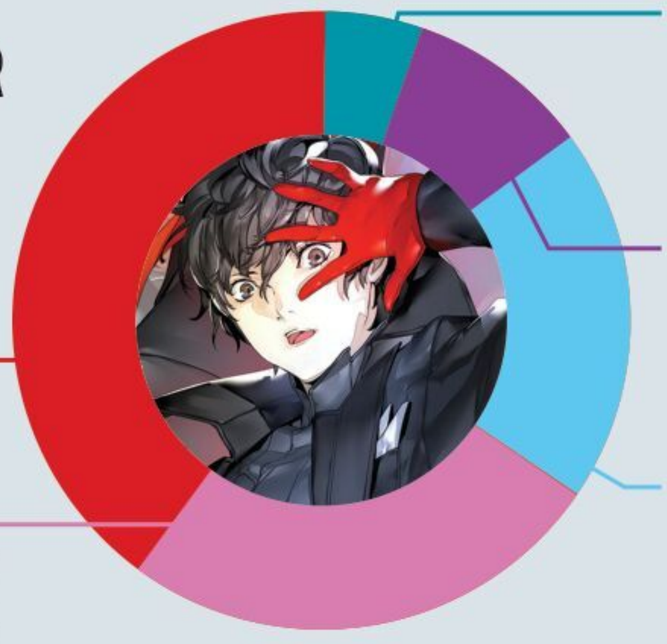
HANG LOOSE

Making your way through the story will take almost a full year. In-game, that is. In real life it'll easily take over 100 hours if you include this edition's chunky, post-game epilogue. Starting school in April, a calendar system takes you through each day. It adds to the sense of always pushing forward, whether that's to see what each new dungeon will hold, or just chasing the game's many bouts of downtime where you can just hang out with friends. This either strengthens their powers in battle, or awards you buffs, depending on if they're a party member or not.

P5R's story is a great tale that will resonate with anyone who remembers being a misunderstood teen, and the characters still pack enough charm to stack up against the

MAKING A THIEFERER

How your escapades play out...



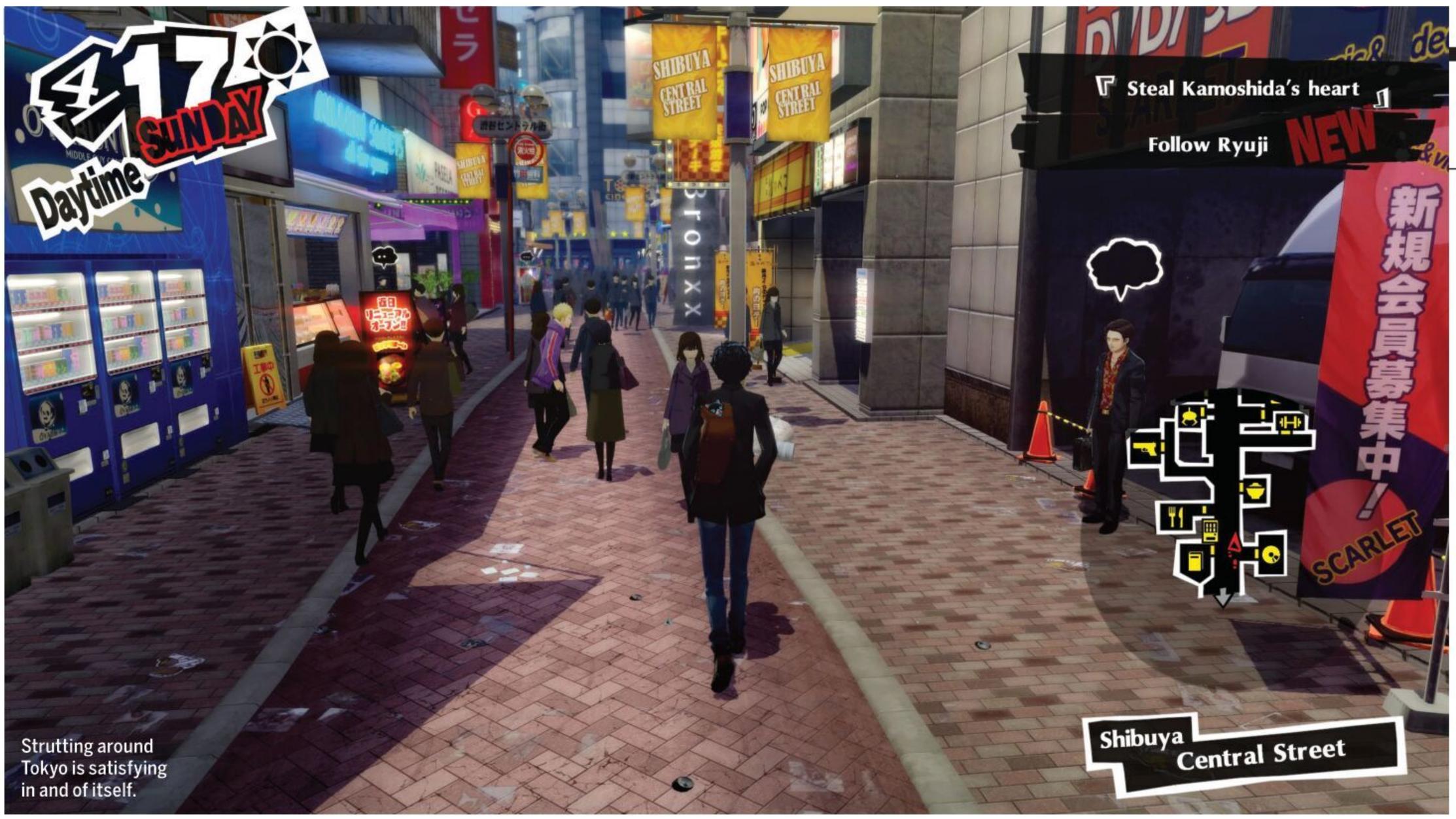
40% Battles against bizarre demons.

25% Arranging your social calendar last minute, then feeling guilty for blowing Ryuji off.

5% Having to return some video tapes.

10% Gorging burgers on rainy days for the stat boosts.

20% Moving through cover as you explore dungeons, finding plenty of hidden loot.



Strutting around Tokyo is satisfying in and of itself.

genre's best. Even so, there are still some missteps in how it handles its material, though improvements in this release have been made – such as an off-colour gay joke that's been toned down. More often than not, the hits land, and you'll find yourself getting emotional at your pals' tragic story arcs. Less successful is the strange romance you can initiate with your homeroom teacher, and how some additional scenes in the *Royal* release leaves a fan favourite 'ships' feeling queer-baity.

Back to what you can do – there's so much of it, it'll feel like you never have enough time in the day. To max out every character or unlock everything you'll need to staunchly follow a guide – which I wouldn't recommend. Instead, by not being able to do everything, the game empowers you to follow your nose, and get into your own groove. Depending on the day of the week or even weather, the people who want to hangout with you or activities you can take on across the daytime and evening change. The school shop's health-restoring yakisoba bun is so popular you can only buy it once every Friday, for example. Studying in the rain will give an extra boost to Knowledge. It's a testament to the game's strength that even with its length, you'll rarely get bored.

Note that I said 'rarely', not 'never'. *Shin Megami Tensei*'s (of which *Persona* is a spin-off)

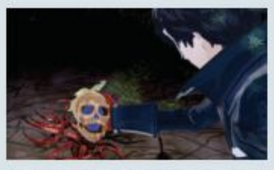
FAR LEFT: Don't expect finishing moves to be any less stylish than everything else.

CROWNING ACHIEVEMENTS

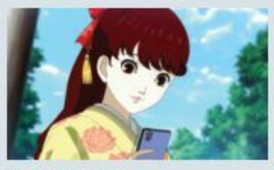
What makes this version of P5R *standout?*

FRAME JOB
Though the game runs great on PC, graphical options are a little limited. Still, keyboard and mouse controls work really well.

VAULT CRACKING
All previously released DLC is included in this version from the get-go, meaning no worrying about microtransactions.



CRIMINAL SEEDS
Dungeons have been redesigned compared to the original release. That includes Will Seeds, which give bonus accessories.



LONGER SENTENCE
An unlockable 'third term' wraps up the original story – delivering on arcs for all your favourite party members.

obsession with near-endless dungeons continues with Mementos, a subway-themed proc-gen dungeon representing the generic shared consciousness of the city, with new chunks of floors to descend to opening up the further you get in the game. It's not optional either, as you will have to slog through it whether that's piece-meal or in one big chunk. It's better here than it was at launch, your cat-pal Morgana's cat-bus form now geared up to reach new top speeds, collector Jose offering new rewards for exploring, and more side missions to mop up. It's not the worst lengthy JRPG dungeon, but it's still an incredibly long one.

DEMON DAYS

Thankfully, it's not just the calendar that keeps things moving. Everything is slick, right down to the menus. Everything is designed to keep you pushing forward. Each battle command that bursts from your party, for example, is easily accessed from your controller or keyboard, so you don't spend too much time navigating. It sounds minor, but it makes battle snappy, especially as you learn each area's stable of demons, and how to exploit their own weaknesses.

Tactically, a good fight in *Persona 5* is all about keeping up that momentum. You'll enter most fights with advantage, thanks to a cover system that means you can jump enemies roaming the map with ease.

A good fight in *Persona 5* is all about keeping up that momentum

But fail, and an awareness meter will fill up, making things more dangerous until you clear enough fights for it to settle down. In combat, if you bust an enemy's skull with their elemental weakness, whack them with a critical hit, or score a technical hit on a debuffed enemy, you can knock them down and score a 'one more'.

Rather than just giving a party member another attack, the 'one more' can also be handed off to an ally using the Baton Pass. That means from one opening, you can chain a series of weaknesses. Down all foes, and you'll initiate a hold up, from which you either perform a spectacular, high-damage All-Out Attack on them; or natter with them instead. The latter can be used to obtain all sorts of goodies from items to cold hard cash, or you can get them to join your ranks.

Unlike the rest of the party, Joker has the unique ability to befriend more than one demon, bringing a stock of them into battle (starting at six), which can be switched between each turn. A Joker-of-all-trades, that means he can bring immense utility to brawls, depending on how you kit him out. While *P5R* sports easy modes, even those will require some thoughtful plays. Thank your past self when you end up needing to rely on that demon you picked up with a resistance to dark insta-kills, for instance.

You won't just be welcoming demons from the field into your arms, but creating them yourself. The aetherial velvet room is open to you, where mysterious entities will talk you through the art of demon fusion, allowing you to combine two together into a new one who can inherit some of the previous bunch's skills. While each demon does level up and earn new skills – and can even feed on other ones for direct-xp in this version – they won't match up to your own character growth. Jumping ahead levels by making literal deals with the devil is the way to get ahead, and means you'll be mastering new powers and party set-ups. It's just another lockpick in *P5R*'s set of thieving tools that allows this RPG to constantly keep things fresh across a lengthy runtime.

P5R is just a game that goes down smoothly. There's an urge to see both the large story beats unfold, and to pack in as many character moments as you can. It might not be what you'd expect from quite possibly the longest JRPG you'll ever play, but each of those many hours is filled to the brim with inventiveness that can make it hard to go back to other games in the genre. The dungeons, the battles, even the hangs outs at burger joints are just that much better. I could play something else, but the chance to replan my schedule on new game plus is tempting. ■

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

Endlessly slick, battles and story alike are a joy to play through. No turn-based JRPG feels as good as this.

94

RIGHT: Perhaps the best JRPG dungeons ever, there's plenty of meaningful interaction to be found in these areas.

BRICK BY BRICK

LEGO BRICKTALES is a satisfying, imperfect new step forward for Lego games

By Kaile Hultner

A confession: I'm not very good at building with Lego. This is a revelation as much as it is an admission, something I really only figured out while playing *Lego: Bricktales* over the weekend. It's one thing to place random Lego bricks in an aesthetically pleasing way; it's another thing entirely to, as *Bricktales* bids its players to do, construct architecturally-stable structures out of nothing but bricks and basic guidelines.

The game starts off simple enough. You are a young builder who has been summoned to an abandoned theme park by your wacky inventor grandfather, known forever as Grandpa. Grandpa has built a portal that can take people to other locations, but first, you have to help him restore power to his basement lab after an accident fried all the systems. This is the tutorial stage, and nothing is meant to be that hard here. You make a simple bridge, reconnect some pipes, flip a switch and get back to Grandpa in one piece.

From there, you're tasked with collecting five 'happiness crystals' to help Grandpa renovate the abandoned park before the nearby mayor comes to evict him. You can find these crystals in each of the five stages you travel to in the course of the campaign, and the general flow is the same throughout: arrive in a new place, figure out what's making people in the area unhappy, solve that problem by building things out of Lego, collect the happiness crystal, return to your grandpa and build some theme park rides. Lather, rinse, and repeat.

You have to subject your build to a pretty brutal physics battery

The nice part about going through each stage is that you notice little hidden items, like collectible animals or treasure chests, that you can't get yet unless you unlock a special power. Once you've collected all the powers, however, you're free to return to any stage you want and roam freely. This liberated sense of movement is rewarded by finally unlocking the hidden areas, getting all the collectibles, and eventually buying all the stuff at each level's cosmetics store. (Doing so grants you new clothes for your builder, and new cosmetic bricks to use on your successful puzzle builds later.)

A BUILDER'S PARADISE?

ClockStone Studio, *Bricktales*' developer, is best-known for its *Bridge Constructor* series, and it brings the general vibe of that prior series into their work here. When you enter a new puzzle, you are given all of your available parts, an area to build them in with upper and lower bounds, and a few instructions, like "build the bridge so that 1) nothing breaks and 2) the test robots can cross it". You're then free to build whatever you feel like that meets those conditions.

Sometimes you have to subject your build to a pretty brutal physics battery, like watching a perch for some parrots swing wildly around in an attempt to keep balanced, or a one-ton weight drop directly on the one place you forgot to fortify. Other times, the only instruction "build a perfect pyramid" has you pulling your hair out as you try and fail repeatedly to do what it says, with no hint system to help you.

Like I said at the beginning, I found out this weekend that I'm not very good at building with Lego. I'm not skilled at engineering or architecture and found these puzzles exceptionally difficult, to the degree that I had to take regular breaks to keep myself from getting too frustrated. However, in overcoming these puzzles – which, to Lego aficionados might perhaps seem too easy – I discovered that I appreciated the creative potential of Lego that much more.

My builds were often a bit janky and unrefined, but they were physically sound and they met the

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A Lego original game where you actually build with Lego

EXPECT TO PAY
$42

DEVELOPER
ClockStone Studio

PUBLISHER
Thunderful Games

REVIEWED ON
AMD Aerith 0405 2.8 GHz; AMD Van Gogh 0405 GPU, 16GB RAM (Steam Deck 256GB)

MULTIPLAYER
No

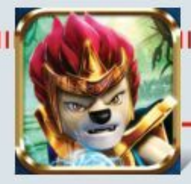
LINK
thunderfulgames.com/games/lego-bricktales

BLOCK PARTY *The abridged history of Lego games*

1997
LEGO ISLAND
The first Lego game to hit the PC. An open-world action adventure title before they were cool.

2006
LEGO BRICKS
A pre-smartphone mobile *Tetris* clone. Exactly what it sounds like.

2011
LIFE OF GEORGE
The oddly unique combination of physical bricks and another mobile app.



2013
LEGENDS OF CHIMA ONLINE
A Lego MMORPG developed by *Arkham Origins*' developer.

2017
LEGO WORLDS
Not exactly a *Minecraft* clone, but very much of a piece with it. Everything is made out of Lego.

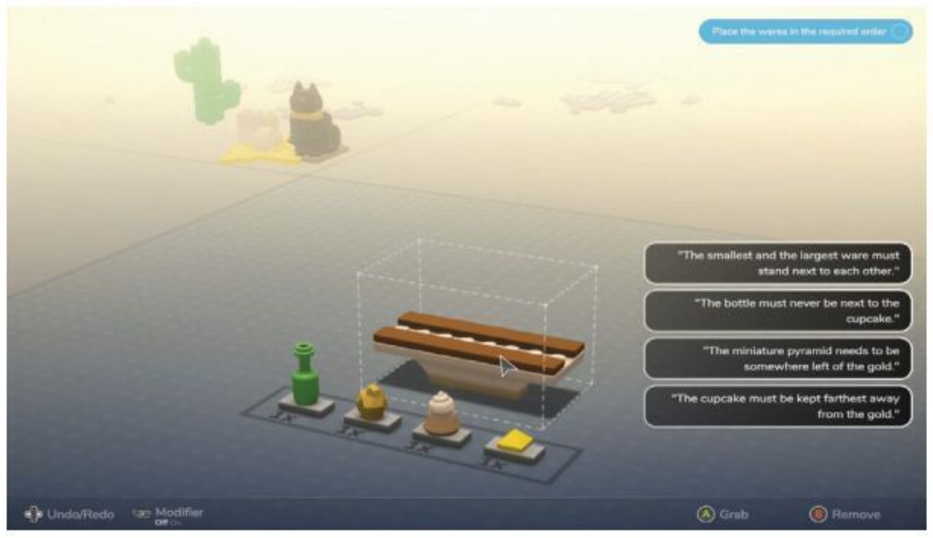
2022
LEGO STAR WARS: THE SKYWALKER SAGA
Combines every major Star Wars movie.

A brick fit for a king.

ABOVE: None of these rides are up to code! Whee!!

FAR RIGHT: Boning up on my engineering skills.

Rusty
Because electricity is dangerous? And only an expert should mess around with it? And it's irresponsible to say otherwise to children!
...


Place the wares in the required order
"The smallest and the largest ware must stand next to each other."
"The bottle must never be next to the cupcake."
"The miniature pyramid needs to be somewhere left of the gold."
"The cupcake must be kept farthest away from the gold."
Undo/Redo
Modifier
Grab
Remove

ABOVE: Is... is this a riddle? Or is a spy trying to make contact in code?

requirements – good enough for government work, as the old saying goes. On the especially difficult builds, like spiral staircases or multi-level bridges, I always breathed a major sigh of relief when the test robots made it to their destination without everything breaking. Seeing my messy work succeed became an antidote to my frustration.

I had a good – though not great – time with *Lego: Bricktales*. The frustration I felt at the difficulty and obtuseness of some of the puzzles was narrowly outpaced by the satisfaction I felt in finally solving them. The writing wasn't the strongest I've seen in a game this year, but the overall quick pace means that nothing ever truly overstays its welcome, even the longer fetch quest chains. It might take a minute for the game to get there, but I think all of its elements come together to help *Lego: Bricktales* stand triumphantly on its own two janky, shaky legs. ■

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

Lego: Bricktales **manages to build a lot of fun despite some structural shakiness and tricky puzzles.**

75

NOT OVER YET

OVERWATCH 2 succeeds in spite of itself

By Tyler Colp

As a free-to-play successor to Blizzard's 2016 hero shooter (that also replaces the original game), *Overwatch 2* is both reinvigorating and regressive. It's an exciting new reason to play a game that shaped modern shooters and get a glimpse at why nothing in the last six years has bested it. But its biggest changes and invasive monetisation system threaten to drain the joy out of it until there's nothing left.

Overwatch 2 is *Overwatch 1* at 1.5x speed. It's the same game, but compressed. Two teams battle over an objective in beautifully rendered, near-future locations around the world. Each side has a tank hero, two damage dealers, and two supports. Both teams fight to occupy space on the map with all their various hero abilities and ultimates. It's an FPS in form, but matches unfold a little differently than they do in most other shooters.

Team fights are an exchange of resources, punctuated by powerful ultimates that swing it in a new direction. Instead of split-second firefights or large-scale sniper duels, *Overwatch* fights urge you to think of it like a game of chess.

Overwatch 2 takes the timeline of a match and squeezes it down. Its chaotic battles erupt and end slightly, but noticeably, faster than they do in the original game. The intricacies of *Overwatch 1*'s teamwork have been reduced with heaps of changes that let heroes solve problems on their own, empowering more selfish play. Many of the heroes across all of the roles can move through the maps faster and deal more damage than ever before. Collaborative strategies still matter – and still supersede individual performance – but the predictable rhythm of a match has warped, losing detail in the process.

It takes the timeline of a match and squeezes it down

DAMAGE CONTROL

Overwatch 2 kicks a tank off of both teams. Tanks that were once designed to complement each other have morphed into the equivalent of a *Dark Souls* boss. Orisa used to sit behind a barrier shield, spew suppressive fire, and yank people out of position with her Halt ability. She was built to be the nucleus of a team, with a co-tank circling around her to cover flanks and off-angles. Now she's shieldless, absurdly resilient, and armed with a spear. Like many *Overwatch* characters – two of its Japanese heroes are ninjas, its Korean hero is an esports player, and one of its Black heroes, Doomfist, is an imposing villain – Orisa has become yet another stereotype that references the young Black inventor that created her in the game's near-future version of Africa. She's no longer the protector of Numbani; she's the aggressor. Orisa, and most of the other tanks, are equipped to deal almost as much damage as a DPS hero if you let them.

The changes to supports aren't as drastic, but new hero Kiriko suggests that the role is headed in a similar direction. Many of the supports now veer much closer to MOBA design where you debuff enemies and occasionally prevent or soften incoming attacks more often than you heal. Kiriko isn't a pure healer like Mercy or Moira, she's a support who teleports and wall-climbs around the map looking for targets to flick her kunai at, dealing DPS-levels of critical headshot damage.

The DPS category continues the trend. They've been stripped of their crowd control abilities and had their kits sharpened for maximum damage output. Cassidy loses his Flashbang for countering fast flanker heroes for a sticky and homing Magnetic Grenade that simply deals a lot of damage when it goes off. And Sombra, a hero who fed her team information while invisible and timed ability-disabling hacks for her team to follow up, now has a personal 40% damage buff on hacked targets to do it all herself. So much of *Overwatch 2*'s design focuses on aim as the most important and 'fair' skill and it simplifies the game's fights and filters out the creativity in its DPS heroes.

As the synergistic but distinct roles within *Overwatch 2*'s hero roster begin to consolidate, the necessity of teamwork is diminished. Most of the game's roster is now designed to eliminate the enemy team as fast as possible. Through

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A sci-fi 5v5 hero shooter set in a near-future Earth

EXPECT TO PAY
Free-to-play

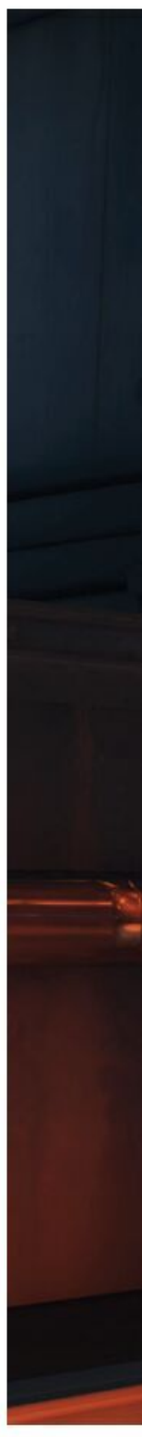
DEVELOPER
Blizzard

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
RTX 3080, Ryzen 9 3900X, 32GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
playoverwatch.com



A LITTLE RESPEC

Some heroes have faced more tweaks than others

DOOMFIST
The Big Fist has swapped to tank and can block damage.

ORISA
The Omnic horse can now send you flying with a spear.

MEI
Mei can't freeze people anymore, but does more damage.

MERCY
The healer has a meter that lets her fly up into the air.

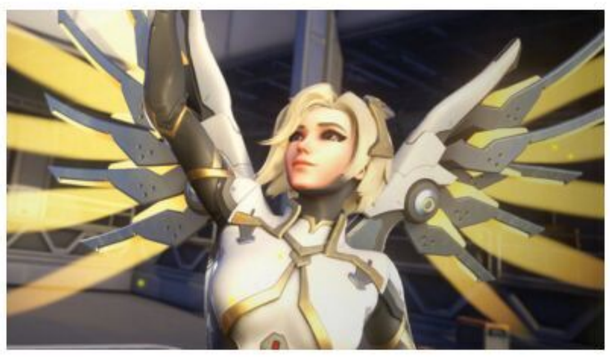
ABOVE: Genji has a new customisable skin.

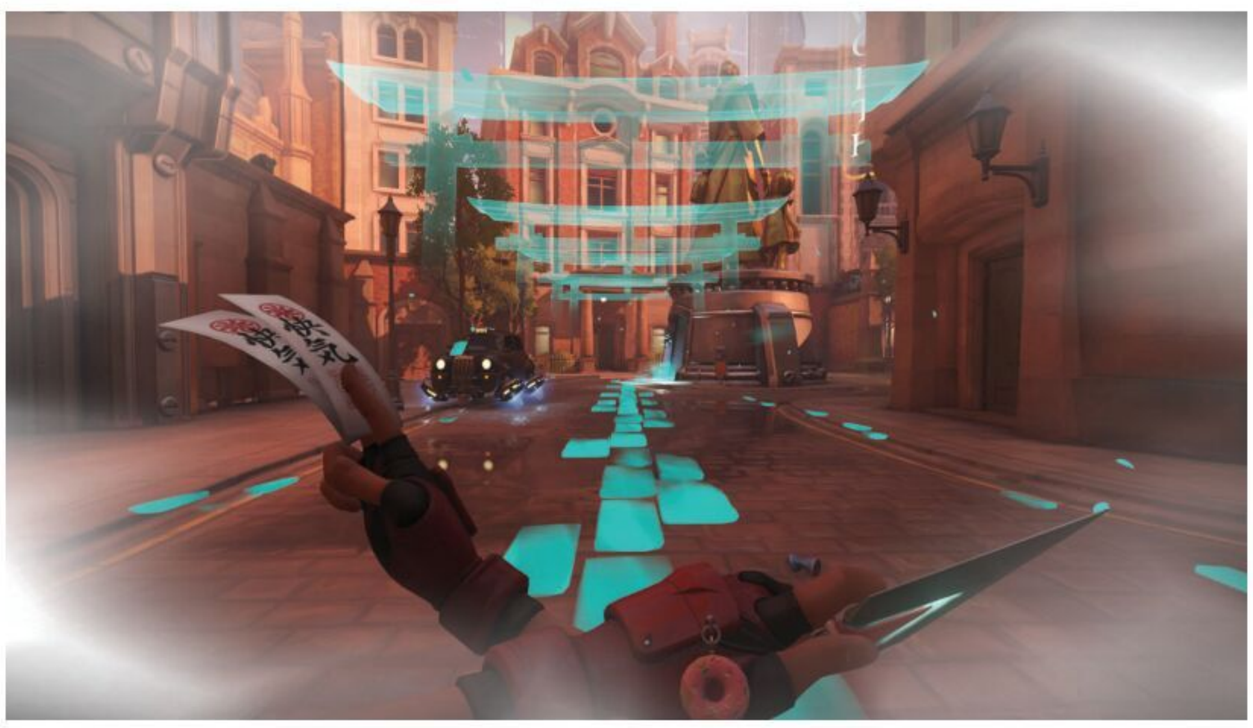
BELOW: D.Va got an EDM skin that plays music.

Sojourn is a blend of Soldier 76 and Widowmaker.

RIGHT: All the heroes have new basic looks.

FAR RIGHT: Old maps get updated lighting.





Kiriko's ult lets her team rush forward at immense speed.

sweeping balance changes to most of the heroes and powerful passive role bonuses, the most distinct heroes have had their strengths and weaknesses blurred so they more closely resemble each other. Bastion's mobile turret form mirrors Soldier 76's run-and-gun style, Doomfist as a hyper-mobile tank is a xeroxed Winston, and Mercy can now glide in all directions with a wonky new meter system to keep up with the other supports.

Tanks and supports used to operate on the edge of *Overwatch*'s core FPS framework, complicating firefights with life-saving and disruptive abilities that had to be worked around. Now, tanks and supports battle in the arena like everyone else, their unique abilities mere footnotes in the saga of a match.

All of these changes make *Overwatch 2* a more approachable game than the first one, and more immediately rewarding as a solo player. You can hop in, choose a hero, and intuit your role in the team quickly. But as everyone races to score a kill, counter-play is de-emphasised – you can almost always simply eliminate the enemy team faster. Heroes who used to be kept in check by stuns and other crowd control abilities, such as Genji, can now slice through a team before they even know he's in the game.

Experienced players can still identify the ways teamwork led to a victory, but it illustrates how much *Overwatch 2* obscures the subtle dynamics of team play and encourages players to chase their own 'pop off' moments. Without any clear indicators of that teamwork, whether via the game's new mid-match scoreboard or the same post-match Play of the Game clips, *Overwatch 2* sells the illusion that to win, you have to carry your team.

Blizzard's commitment to supporting it has made me optimistic

DAILY GRIND

To earn XP on the battle pass and Overwatch Coins to spend on cosmetics in the shop, you have to complete daily, weekly, and seasonal challenges. Some of them are as simple as winning a match and others give you specific goals like healing 10,000 health or landing a triple-kill. None of the challenges are so off-topic that you have to grief a match to get them finished, but it was hard to find the motivation to do more than I needed for my daily on nights I had other plans. It's easy to earn four or five tiers of the battle pass in a few hours of play, but if you plan on racing to the new hero (on tier 55 of the battle pass) or grabbing the customisable mythic skin, matches might start to look more like chores than opportunities to adapt and collaborate with your team.

Purely for attaining cosmetic items, the battle pass and the challenges are a slight improvement on *Overwatch 1*'s loot boxes. You have the ability to earn or buy skins, emotes, weapon charms, and a good bit more without having to worry about probability. But by locking heroes behind a months-long grind for Overwatch Coins, both systems start to chisel away parts of the core game that's already on the verge of being hollowed out.

Overwatch's strategic depth, variety of heroes and fun cosmetics are enough to keep my attention. The battle pass and challenges complicate progression and introduce FOMO to incentivise you to pay money or spend loads of time grinding.

WATCH OUT

Despite a list of issues, from a Bastion bug that let you spam his ult, to a bug that locked you out of most of the heroes, Blizzard has issued several hotfixes and patches that attempt to clean the game up. *Overwatch 2* is officially a live service game. Rough starts can be fixed with time and it's possible that its worrying obsession with 'solo carry potential' and its grindy battle pass could be addressed. The *Overwatch* I love is still in there. It's stretched thin, but Blizzard's commitment to supporting it has made me more optimistic than the worst periods of the original game, when it was nearly stagnant.

There are still moments where I've salvaged a losing game with a sneaky Bastion as my team distracted them on the objective, or Nano Boosted a Pharah in the last seconds of a game to eke out a win. All those weird and brilliant interactions that can happen between the heroes are why *Overwatch* is still unparalleled. And having a lot of friends online and to group up again has reminded me what it was like when the game had enough new material to make everyone eager to experiment.

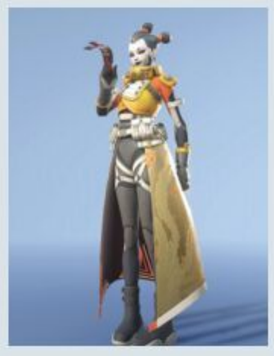
Overwatch 2 could have launched as a much better game and a much more ambitious one. Like the original in 2016, it could have been an FPS for the sort of players and skill sets that other shooters don't often make room for. Instead, it's a confusing sequel that sacrifices its best parts as it transitions to a free-to-play model. The original *Overwatch* is just too robust and too distinct to be completely erased and it's why the sequel remains compelling in spite of itself. However the live service model leaves it in a fragile state. Close as it is to a fully reinvigorated sequel to one of the best shooters in the last decade, it's just as close to collapsing as the pillars of its original design get knocked out. ■

FASHION FORWARD *Our favourite new looks*

SKY CENTURION PHARAH
It looks like it's from Warhammer 40K.

FOREST RANGER CASSIDY
Oh, green is absolutely his colour.

COMMANDO SOJOURN
The Aliens reference is very intentional.



HINOTORI KIRIKO
This is the best skin on the battle pass.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

Overwatch 2 revitalises the stagnant hero shooter, but misunderstands what made it great.

74

EUPHORIA ETERNAL

A **HYPER DEMON** appeared to them and they were terrified

By Samantha Greer

Have you ever wondered, what would it be like to fall into a black hole? Then this might be a game for you. Not because it answers the question, but because it offers an experience akin to dancing on reality's edge. Perspective, time and space all break down as the game encourages you to push beyond your limits. Which is funny for a game about chasing high scores and shooting monsters, something games have done since their inception.

Edge magazine might never have bothered to say "If only we could talk to the monsters" if shooters then had felt as transcendent as Hyper Demon.

Sorath's last game, *Devil Daggers*, was a distillation of '90s shooters, specifically *Doom* and *Quake*. Boiling down their essence into a pure and spooky shoot-'em-up that harnessed a potent atmosphere through responsive, simple violence and a stripped down but evocative audio visual landscape. No chasing keycards, no flimsy narrative... nothing but shooting and surviving through an unending dark full of undead spectres. All echoed growls and screams, bones scuttling against stone. Firing a stream of hot knives out into the skulls emerging from the shadows. How far could you go in the face of it?

You shoot daggers from you ethereal hand with two firing modes

Hyper Demon isn't about surviving. It's about thriving. Scoring this time around isn't based around how long you can live but about how quickly you can put down ethereal beasts. The more you can cut down in the shortest amount of time, the higher you score. The bigger the monster, the better. Some of my best runs have lasted mere seconds. *Devil Daggers* felt like being trapped in a nightmare basement with unending horrors but the vibe in *Hyper Demon* is very much, "I'm not locked in here with you, you're locked in here with me!"

From first-person perspective you shoot daggers from your ethereal hand with two firing modes, a machine gun and shotgun blast, now complimented by pick-ups that can be used as laser beams. Though these lasers can be used to detonate pick-ups with devastating fireworks. Moving around involves more than hopping, you can fire yourself into the air with a blast at the ground and dash to dodge out of the way of foes. Mastering these skills is made a lot easier with a tutorial mode that runs you through each element in isolation. I recommend playing through the lot. They're step-by-step guides that are easy to follow and trust me, you'll need it. Everything moves so quickly, yourself included, and a single hit will end your run.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A score based first-person shooter

EXPECT TO PAY
$13

DEVELOPER
Sorath

PUBLISHER
In-house

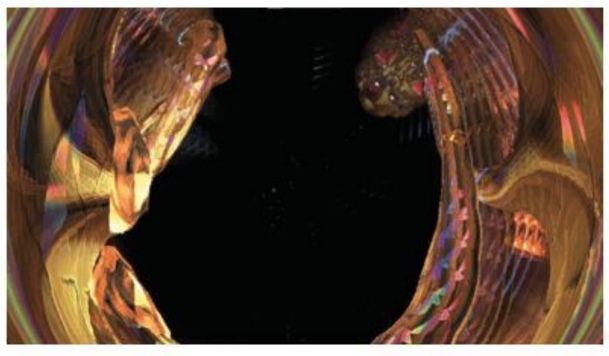
REVIEWED ON
64-Bit Windows 10, Nvidia GeForce GTX-970, Intel i7-4790K, 16GB RAM

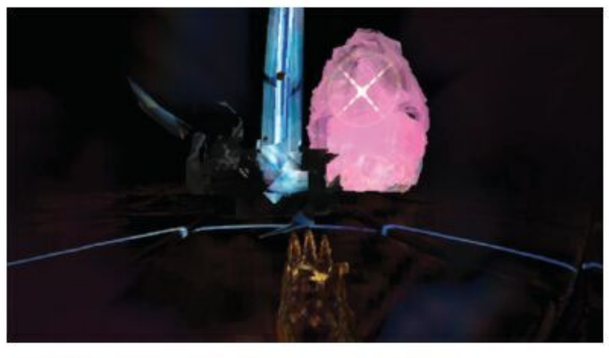
MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
hyprd.mn

FROM HELL

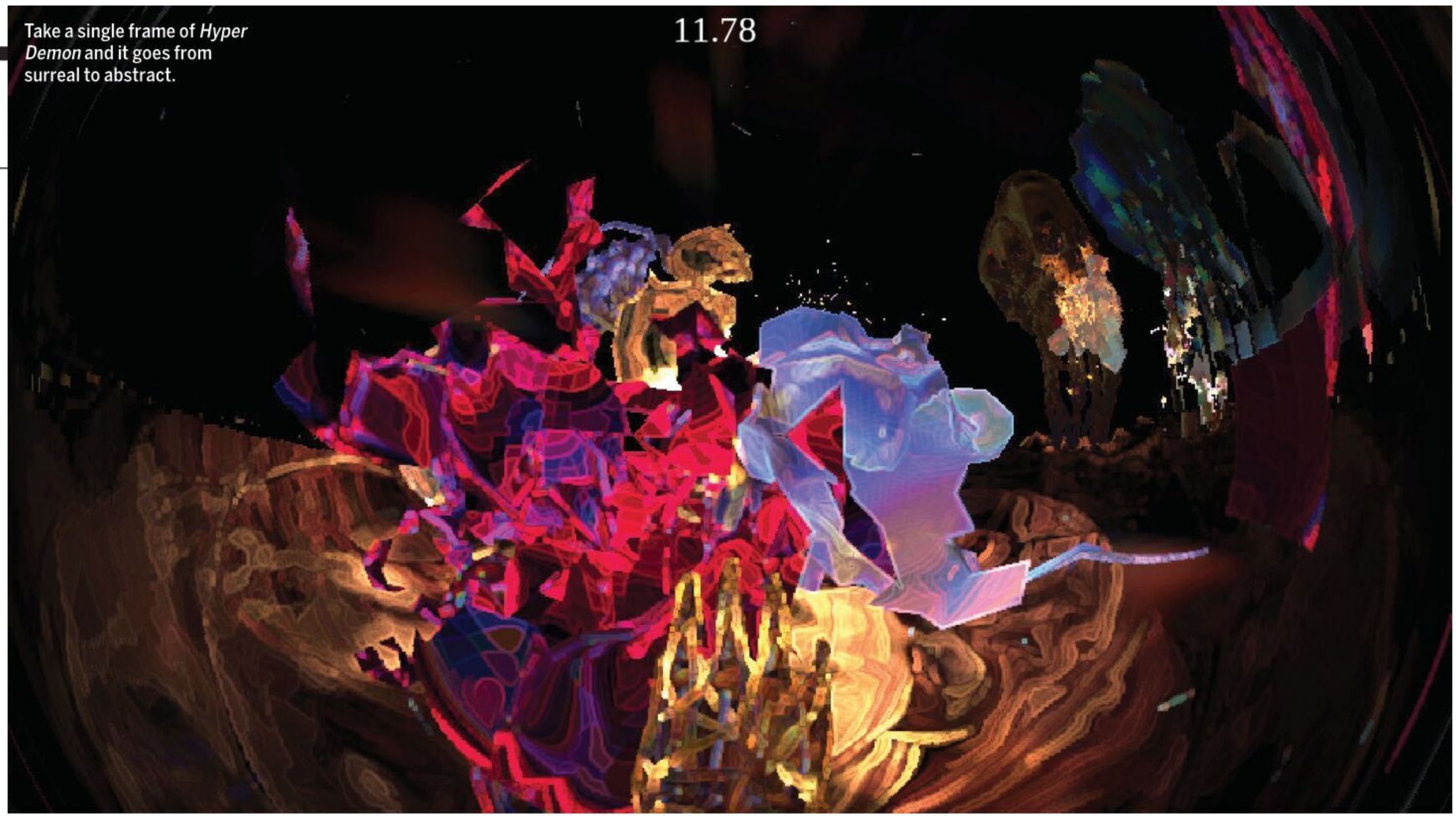
Your abilities are only the half of it anyway. After enough runs you realise each monster is the key to taking control of fights, turning your enemies into steps on your path to god-like prowess. The dizzying heights you reach with each power-up and each foe overcome are virtually, and visually, euphoric. The entire dark landscape of the world wraps around your vision and lets





TOP: Where we're going, you won't need eyes to see.

For all its obscurity, *Hyper Demon* has very helpful and straightforward tutorials.



Take a single frame of *Hyper Demon* and it goes from surreal to abstract.

ABOVE: As you grow more powerful, reality seems to bend around you, distorting the world.

FAR RIGHT: Attacks are more about timing and proximity than just dishing out damage.

you funnel every creature into the path of your destruction.

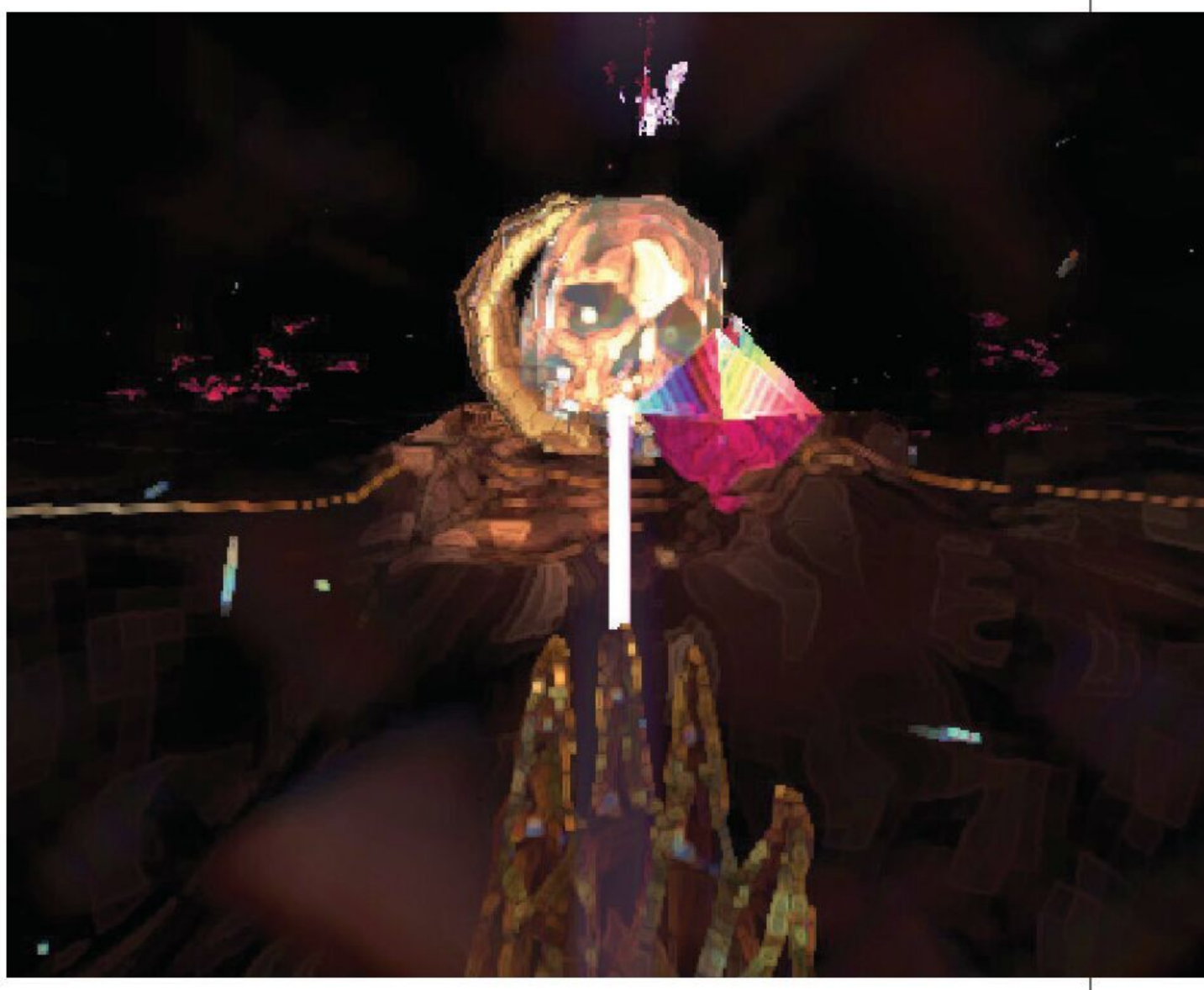
The visuals and audio are something you'll either find alluring or off-putting depending on your persuasion but it's not as impenetrable as it seems in screenshots. Once you're in control, that storm of colour and light is yours to wield. Each dazzling effect is specific, an explosion only caused by one kind of pick up or the wail only that of a particular enemy dying. Learn them and you can grasp control from the abyss.

That's the challenge at the core of the game. Tension between the known and unknown. Learning how to go from flailing helplessly in the dark to the destroyer of worlds. Chasing increasing power is the hook of so many action games, a fantasy so baked-in it barely even registers any more. It's expected. *Hyper Demon* makes it feel unexpected. You're not gathering better weapons, not trading in pistols for rocket launchers. You are simply learning. Everything that makes you better at the game is knowledge, there are no tools that can be taken away. Because you are the Hyper Demon. ■

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

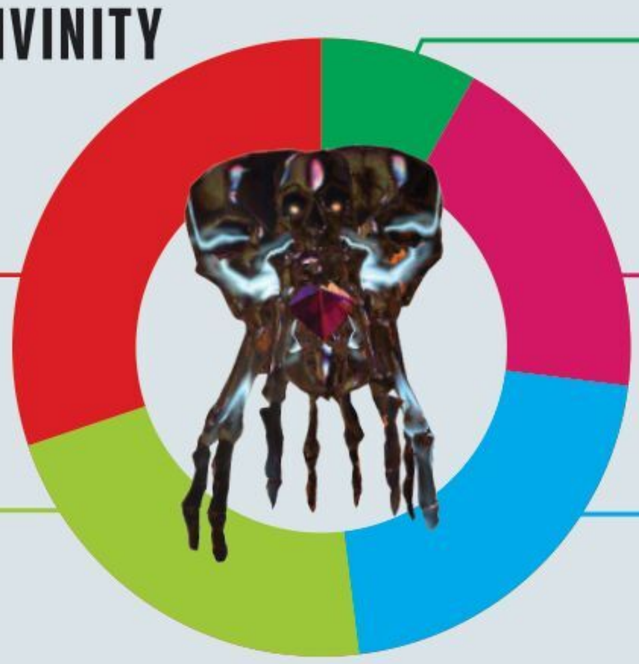
Hyper Demon is a masterpiece that will have you soaring like an angel through the depths of hell.

95



DIVIDING DIVINITY

How to build an angelic shooter



8% CREEPS
The sensation someone is standing behind you.

30% QUAKE
Those retro 3D visuals and bunny hopping are unmistakable.

19% DOOM
Stuck in an otherwordly plain with demons to shoot? Check.

22% DISCO LIGHTS
Its crystalline lightshow is like nothing I've played.

21% DAGGERS
Lots and lots of daggers.

LAUNCH DELAY

DUAL UNIVERSE is a challenging space sim in every sense of the word

By Rick Lane

My first attempt to reach space in *Dual Universe* ended in disaster. I'd purchased a Space Bike, which is the cheapest space-viable craft Novaquark's ludicrously ambitious space sim offers, with the intent of doing a test flight from the planet Alioth to one of its nearby moons. But through a combination of ignorance and ineptitude, I failed to escape the planet's gravitational pull, and ended up crashing 60 kilometres away from the nearest transportation.

In *Dual Universe*, distance is measured at a 1-to-1 scale, and without the resources to repair my bike, I was faced with the prospect of a two-hour trek back to civilisation. Having already battled with the game's byzantine systems at seemingly every turn, I tempted to bin it off completely.

After sulking for a bit, I sat back down and got on with it. And while not exactly thrilling, that long journey home proved more interesting than I had anticipated. You see, *Dual Universe*'s planets and major moons are not environmentally uniform, and as I travelled I passed through wind-sculpted deserts, lush forests and meadowy plains. I also saw many player-built structures, ranging from starting prefab houses to elaborate industrial complexes, all with spaceships parked nearby. At one point, I spent 15 minutes travelling across the bottom of a lake, and encountered several player installations that had been built beneath the waves.

It gave me a sense of what had been going on elsewhere in the world, and by the time I finally returned to civilisation, I was inspired to keep going. And this kind of encapsulates what playing *Dual Universe* is like. It's a wilfully obscure, regularly frustrating and arguably unfinished experience. But hiding beneath the tangled mess of its many systems are moments of vision.

Broadly speaking, *Dual Universe* is a hybrid of *EVE Online*, *No Man's Sky*, and *Factorio*, with a little bit of *Minecraft* thrown in for good measure. It aims to be fully simulated, player driven sandbox, giving players the tools to build their own structures, design their own ships and create their own interstellar enterprises that form part of a dynamic economy.

The opening hours of *Dual Universe* are a pretty miserable grind

You literally drop into this universe as a lone pioneer, given a chunk of territory to claim as your own on the game's starting moon of Haven, before descending to your chosen plot via orbital dropship. You then set up your starter habitat (I picked a flash futurist villa with its own miniature runway) deploy your starting vehicle, a speeder, and get a crash course in how the game's voxel-based creative tools work.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A space sandbox that lets you establish your own industries and trade in a player-driven economy

EXPECT TO PAY
$45

DEVELOPER
Novaquark

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 5 3600, Nvidia GeForce 2080 Super, 32 GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
Massively

LINK
dualuniverse.game

From here, you're theoretically free to do whatever you like, and start building your legend within the Helios system. In practice, you'll probably corkscrew yourself into the ground figuring out what you should be doing. *Dual Universe*'s learning curve is more of a launch trajectory, with countless interlinked systems to learn at the start of the game. Building, mining, crafting, establishing industrial pipelines, two different types of flight mechanics, the labyrinthine Talents system that dictates a huge amount of what you can and cannot do within different professions. Even something as ostensibly simple as buying and selling items at the market has its own tutorial that you will need to run through.

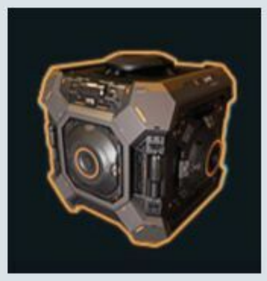
SKY'S THE LIMIT

It's an intimidating prospect, and the great irony of it is that what you should be doing at this early stage is very simple – breaking rocks. Planets are scattered with randomly generated surface ores that can be mined with your universal multitool. These ores are the baseline through which more complex materials are developed, but they can also be sold en masse for a small but easily-attainable income. Once you've got a few hundred grand under your belt, you can purchase standalone mining units that passively mine ore, and can also be 'calibrated' roughly once a day to provide a fat chunk of ore.

The problem with doing this is that eBay doesn't exist in *Dual Universe*. To sell anything in the game, you must take it to market like a medieval peasant. And depending on where you initially planted your flag, your starting point could be 20, 50, even 100 kilometres from the nearest market, which is a long trip in your starting speeder. Consequently, the opening hours of *Dual Universe* are a pretty miserable grind, as you drive to the market, drop off a big bag of rocks, go home,

DO IT YOURSELF

Get started on the building system



CORE UNIT
All constructs are centred around a construct node, which come in several sizes, with different types for structures and vehicles.

HONEYCOMB MATERIAL
The 'stuff' that forms the basis of your structure. There are many types of material and more advanced compounds.

ELEMENTS
Elements tend to be more functional objects, like mining units, industrial apparatus, or for more specialised ship parts like fuel tanks etc.

FAR LEFT: Your starting speeder is frankly a waste of time.

LEFT: The game features an elaborate crafting system, but boy is it hard to grapple with.

BELOW: You can build your own ship, or buy a selection of pre-made ones.

SMALL CARGO
TYPE: HYBRID
CREW: 1
WEAPONS: N/A
OTHER: 1 S ROCKET BOOSTER
SHIP WEIGHT: 27.8T
NOW ONLY
1 135 000
TURN OFF
HAVEN
Missions can go in regular containers
How do i place a Static core unit?
ok. Whats the idea of parcel container then?
For when you want people to delivery things to you or from you
ok ty for info
nvm... i forgot to put Territory unit down...lmao
Can I not queue up more than one batch of production in industry machines?
No
Nope, only 1 type of output at a time
ok..... How do i put territory Unit down?

RIGHT: Anyone spy a Welcome Break?

FAR RIGHT: Flying between planets is a lot of fun, although flights to distant worlds can take literal hours.

BELOW: Lovely view.

mine more rocks and then drop those off again.

There are a couple of ways to escape from this systemic chain-gang. You could buy yourself a new territory control unit and take a shuttle to the planet Alioth, where you can claim a new patch of land that has rarer and more valuable ores. But while claiming your first patch of land on a new planet is free, that land is subject to a weekly tax of 500,000 units (or two-to-four hours of surface ore mining). I don't understand why the game does this. If it's to prevent people from claiming land they don't then use, Novaquark could simply have the game deactivate its claim after, say, failing to log in for a week. Arbitrarily taxing players on imaginary land with a fictional centralised body is downright baffling.

The alternative is to use your ores to make something to sell on the game's market. But there are two issues here. First, making anything remotely useful in *Dual Universe* requires multiple different processes, and unlike *Factorio*, which starts you at the beginning and methodically works you through each process, here you start with what you want to make, then must work backwards to figure out how to make it, which is difficult when something as simple as a storage container has a nearly a dozen nested components. Oh, and everything you craft by hand has a timer attached to it. If you want to build an assembler so you can start automating the crafting process, you're looking at about an hour's worth of crafting to go from raw materials to final product.

SYSTEM SHOCK

The other issue is that, even once you've made something, there's no guarantee you're going to be able to sell it. As I mentioned, *Dual Universe*'s economy is driven by its players. But being a new game with a fairly small playerbase, the economy hasn't had a chance to bed-in yet, so it's hard to know what you should be making and where you should be selling it.

In short, every system is overwrought and difficult to grapple with. At the same time, there's a nagging sense that, despite having launched into v1.0, *Dual Universe* is not actually finished. The play area is currently limited to a single star-system, with the 'Space' section of the game's map menu greyed-out. The planets you explore are topographically beautiful, but largely inert, with no weather systems and no fauna beyond a few pixel-shaded birds and butterflies. The handful of rudimentary delivery missions the game offers feel like a hasty attempt to compensate for the absence of any curated experiences.

Getting anything off the ground is a lot of hard work

Basically, getting anything off the ground in *Dual Universe* is a lot of hard work and only intermittently fun. Anything, that is, except for the ships themselves. Honestly, of all the mistakes *Dual Universe* makes, the biggest is not immediately pointing you to your nearest ship vendor and getting you into the air as quickly as possible, because the flying in this game is splendid.

Dual Universe's flight model leans toward simulation without veering off and crashing into the control tower of realism. Ships are relatively simple to control, but handling is influenced by factors like engine power, fuel-type, momentum, gravity, even the mass of the inventory you're currently carrying. Consequently, even simple hops from your home to the local market require attentive, thoughtful flying, as you need to monitor your altitude to avoid crashing into terrain, and carefully adjust your speed as you approach the landing bay, while also watching out for other player ships that may be parked or themselves landing/taking off.

FLIGHT NIGHT

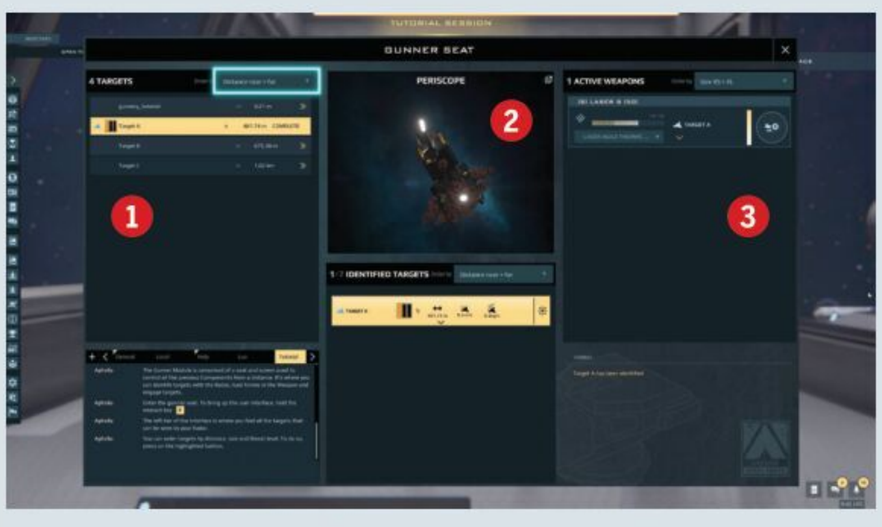
Flying between planets is even better. Departing from a planet's surface is a tricky affair, as the planet's gravity tries to hold you back, while the rapidly thinning air makes it hard to maintain altitude. Get it right, though, and your speed will begin to rapidly increase from the hundreds kph into the tens of thousands. Spaceflight itself is about managing your acceleration and deceleration, as at high speeds it can take several minutes to slow down, and if you start that process too late, you'll smash into the planet like a dart.

Aside from some LOD pop-in on planets, all of this is completely seamless. Indeed, it's one of the best examples of seamless space-to-planet flight that I've ever seen in a game. If you're in flying a hybrid craft (which can do both space and planetary flight) for example, there's a wonderful moment when your blue-tinted atmospheric engines cut out, and your orange-coloured space thrusters slowly kick in, pushing you into the void.

Dual Universe has problems. It attempts to merge a wide array of systems, but does none of them as well as the games those ideas are borrowed from. Its difficulty curve is so steep that many players will slide off it long before they see the game at its best. Doing virtually anything requires you to go through 17 different steps, one of which you will inevitably miss and then have to start the whole process again. But hidden underneath all that is a tangible space sim with some powerful creation tools and a genuinely great flying experience. It's certainly not for everyone, but it's also not a write-off, and for a certain type of brain, juggling all its convolutions will be absolute catnip. ■

BATTLE STATIONS

How the targeting system works



1 TARGETS This menu provides a list of valid targets. You click on a target to "acquire" it.

2 PERISCOPE VIEW The periscope gives you a live view of the enemy you're currently targeting.

3 WEAPONS AND FIRING This menu lists your weapons, clicking the fire button to shoot automatically.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

There's a decent space simulator buried within *Dual Universe*, but you'll need to do a lot of digging to find it.

60

OLD HORIZONS

HOKKO LIFE's newest neighbours might be Tom Nook's lawyers

By Kerry Brunskill

There's no point pretending otherwise: this is Legally Distinct *Animal Crossing*, a relaxing village-'em-up populated with cute critters and the usual range of things to craft, dig up, fish, chop and sell at the local shop. But even if I did know exactly how this is going to play out within seconds of starting it up, more games of this type can only be a good thing, right?

One key departure from Nintendo's winning formula is *Hokko Life*'s use of a sped-up internal clock rather than a real one. A nap fast forwards an hour or two and some serious snoozing can make an entire week pass by in a few button presses. It's a quick and convenient way to get things done, but at the cost of the one thing a game like this should value most: allowing me to busily do nothing, to exist in this space simply because I can.

Hokko Life never actually dares to give me nothing to do. None of my neighbours seemed to notice, never mind care, when I spent several days in a row 'sleeping' just to build a house faster. Trees grow back to their full height from stumps in a few days, and any holes dug during the day are automatically filled at night.

MILD WORLD

It's an unwanted helping hand that makes customisation difficult. Maybe I wanted a few fairy wood style stumps dotted around. Perhaps I was preparing a flower bed in that grassy corner. It also means there's no need to bother making a personal effort to find a balance between local beauty and handy resources, because trees and everything else are just glorified piñatas to hit whenever I need some materials.

Many tools are acquired through repetitive chores I'm free to tackle at will. Unfortunately these vital items and bonuses are disguised by unhelpful silhouettes in the menu, and there's not always a clear line of cause and effect between the work and the reward. It's enforced busywork that keeps taking me away from the things I really want to do. A little personality would go a long way to saving the experience, but again *Hokko Life* falls short.

Many tools are acquired through chores I'm free to tackle at will

Everyone's so blandly nice. There's no sass, no friction, no weird neighbour you can't quite decide whether you want to send love letters to or put in a hole (not that you can do either in *Hokko Life* anyway). The closest these characters come to displaying any individuality stems from sickeningly twee little lines such as, "I've never had so bad a night that things don't look better in the morning," as if they're a wellness guru whose only frame of reference for 'bad things' is that time a barista gave them an oat milk latte because they were all out of almond.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Animal Crossing: Unofficial PC Edition

EXPECT TO PAY
$28

DEVELOPER
Wonderscope

PUBLISHER
Team 17

REVIEWED ON
i7-10750H, RTX 3070 (laptop version), 16GB RAM, SSD

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
hokko.life

Seasonal changes are equally uneventful, with autumn almost as green and lush as a spring day, and summer butterflies still flitting around in a wintry blizzard. The closest the game gets to mechanically recognising the passage of time in any way are the optional fruit trees that peak at different times of year. Village events fail to brighten things up, mostly because there's one bug catching day and one fishing tournament a season to look forward to and apparently nothing else. No spring picnics, no spooky pumpkins at the end of autumn, no end-of-year fireworks.

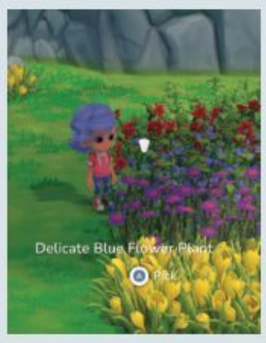
At least *Hokko Life* can disappoint life sim lovers on a wide range of hardware, as comprehensive graphic settings make it easy to play on a variety of PCs – it won't look pretty on the lowest settings, but it will work. Unfortunately this technical competence doesn't help solve numerous UI problems, including a crafting customisation interface that can only be described as a professional 3D artist's idea of 'simple' and tutorial text boxes that fight with the very interfaces they're trying to explain, leading to accidentally skipped text and obscured icons.

Any game that so blatantly comes for *Animal Crossing*'s crown had better be within swinging distance – or at least offer an experience that sets itself apart in some meaningful way, as *Temtem* and *MultiVersus* do. *Hokko Life* achieves neither. It's the "We have *Animal Crossing* at home": The Game. On a platform already filled to bursting with games that offer original takes on wholesome crafting life, it's a particularly shallow imitation. ■

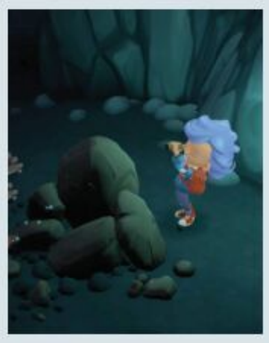
GETTING CRAFTY

You can't just shake cute furniture out of a tree, y'know

TREES
The most common material type comes in standard conifer and tougher mahogany varieties.



PLANTS
Gathered grasses and petals can be used to create everything from fabric to paints.



ORES
Dark mines contain valuable minerals used to craft various tools and decorative objects.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

Hokko Life is a bland alternative to a genre-defining game millions of people are very familiar with.

48

ABOVE: The 'city' turns out to be three mostly empty shops.

FAR LEFT: Creations can be uploaded for others to see and use.

LEFT: Deeper areas of the mines require a light to navigate.

Leave it to Me!
I got this!
Oma
What do you say, do you think you'll be okay taking on the responsibility of improving our town from here on?

Dialogue choices are rare, and often pointless

GARDEN PARTY

Obsidian's survival romp **GROUNDED** is one of the best

By Fraser Brown

Despite not having taken a survey, I feel pretty confident that nobody at PC Powerplay is more afraid of spiders than I am. They petrify me – unless they manage to get on me, at which point I flail around like I'm on fire. And I'd rather be set on fire than feel a spider crawling over my skin. Given this, it's ridiculous that I'd put myself in a situation where I had to review a game that was full of them. But for a survival game as good as *Grounded*, I'm willing to live through one of my worst nightmares.

Grounded is a time travel device, dragging me back to the garden where I used to spend long, sunny afternoons pretending I was in Eternia or Third Earth, collecting grass stains and scrapes. It's a game fuelled by vibrant '90s cartoons and movies like Honey I Shrunk the Kids, with a quartet of kidnapped, shrunken teens exploring the alien world that's right under our noses.

It's a whimsical survival sandbox that feels considerably more playful and welcoming than most, which is why its occasional pivots to arachnid horror are so effective. Back when it launched in Early Access, *Grounded*'s threats were few. The massive, terrifying spiders that littered the garden never wandered far and were easy to outmanoeuvre, lulling me into a false sense of security. But with every update, they became more deadly, transforming into relentless hunters searching for prey in areas I once considered sanctuaries.

Sometimes the best path to victory is cheating a little bit

So even though I'd played a lot of *Grounded* before diving into 1.0, I still had to study my eight-legged nemeses, figuring out their behaviours and weaknesses – a process that typically involved sacrificing myself. It's possible to target creatures by cupping your hands together, making a fleshy telescope, which reveals their resistances and vulnerabilities, but for more information you really need to follow them around and watch how they interact with their thriving ecosystem.

All of the garden's inhabitants have their own patterns. Red ants, for instance, are peaceful but inquisitive when first encountered. They'll fight other bugs, but if you leave them alone they'll not get in your way. If you invade their nest, however, the soldier ants will try to drive you out. And if you start doing some aggressive garden maintenance by squashing lots of friendly ants, they might even declare war. And that's why my very first base had to be abandoned.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A survival game inspired by Honey I Shrunk the Kids

EXPECT TO PAY
$49

DEVELOPER
Obsidian Entertainment

PUBLISHER
Xbox Game Studios

REVIEWED ON
RTX 3080 Ti, Intel i7-8086K, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
Four-player co-op

LINK
grounded.obsidian.net

GROUND WAR

The world is just so tantalisingly reactive, and it's a reactivity you're encouraged to exploit. I killed my first stinkbug – a poison-spewing devil-beast – by creating a three-way brawl between it, a ladybug and a group of ants. The bugs have all the physical advantages, but you've got that clever human brain.

Sometimes the best path to victory is cheating a little bit. Maybe you'll climb up somewhere you can't be reached, peppering your enemies with arrows. Or maybe you'll be even more cunning, drawing them towards a place where you know they'll get stuck. So while the critter AI seems troublingly effective at times, it's also easily baffled or broken. Rather than an issue that needs to be fixed, however, the ability to win fights through cheesy tactics just feels like another legitimate survival strategy.

There are few sandboxes that feel this alive. The garden is never at rest, and every step you take is accompanied by a cacophony of bug noises – at first seemingly discordant, but eventually reassuring and familiar. Visibility is low when you're surrounded by tree-sized grass, but after living in the garden for so long, now I can paint a picture of it using my ears. I feel like a tiny wilderness expert, all thanks to the incredible sound design. At least until I get distracted and something nasty sneaks up on me.

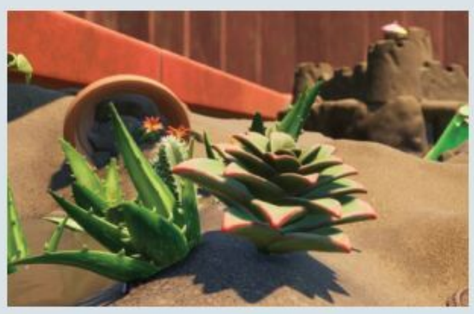
This happens a lot more in co-op. Just the other night I was chatting away with a friend after they

HOME SWEET HOME

Where should you build your main base?

THE MYSTERIOUS DEVICE
This central location is close to where you first begin and is abundant in resources and critters. It's a great place for a starter base, but watch out for spiders just beyond the tree line.

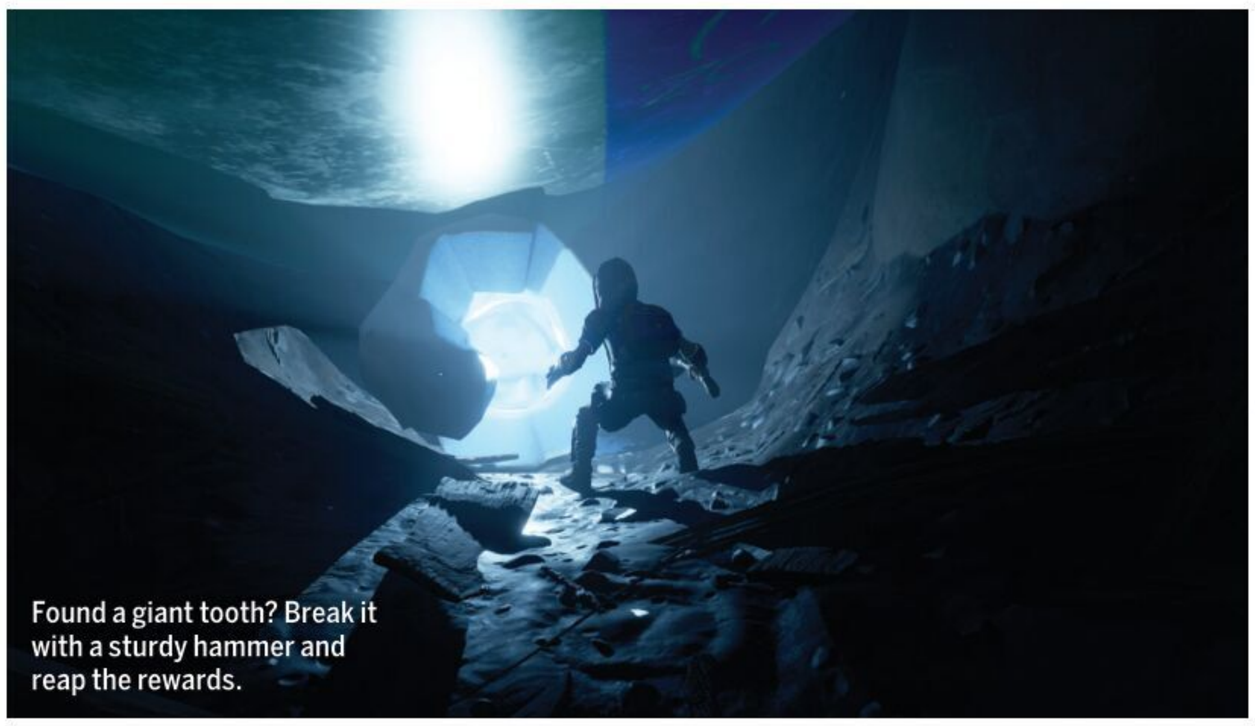
THE POND
The rocks at the edge of the pond, east of the oak tree, are close to two labs, basic and advanced resources, have loads of building space, and you can jump into the water to avoid bugs.



THE SANDBOX
You won't be able to handle the sandbox for a while, but if you're a well-equipped veteran and can handle some nasty creepy crawlies, you can make your own desert encampment.

Yes, the Etch A Sketch works.

SURVIVAL Build a Lean-To. B
GO HOME Chat with BURGL
I'm sure this all must be very disorienting for you, but hopefully I can explain.
BURG.L
E BUSY TALKING



Found a giant tooth? Break it with a sturdy hammer and reap the rewards.

LEFT: Labs are a great source of Raw Science. And danger.

BELOW: Zip lines are a godsend for tiny, tired legs.

FAR RIGHT: The carp is not friendly.

BELOW: Anything could be hiding in the grass. But mostly spiders.

narrowly escaped a spider. We were hanging out in our base next to a building-sized juice box (which I've since turned into a watchtower) discussing how safe we felt, and how we were hidden from any spiders that may have followed him back. Too late, during a break in the conversation, I heard an alien noise: something akin to footsteps, but with more implied menace. And then a huge leg appeared, coming around the corner. Neither of us survived.

Escape is the premise that drives *Grounded* forward. You need to unravel the mystery of your kidnapping and find a way to get big again, exploring labs that were built by the scientist who made the monumental breakthrough that led to your unfortunate situation. These lab excursions can be pretty tricky, and even the easiest one sends you into a spider-infested hedge. Even if escape isn't on your mind, the labs are a great source of Raw Science, which makes life in the garden a lot easier – if you want to survive, you need to get smarter.

Escape is the premise that drives *Grounded* forward

BRAIN POWER

Raw Science is effectively experience, filling a meter until you level up and unlock new crafting recipes. It can be found out in the wild in finite quantities, but you can earn more by completing simple quests for BURG.L, a friendly, bumbling robot. Analysing resources and bug parts at field stations also unlocks related crafting recipes and gives you yet more Raw Science. It's handy to have multiple ways to unlock these recipes, but the level system can sometimes feel superfluous as a result.

More than a few times I've earned nothing at all upon levelling up because I've already unlocked the recipes by using the analyser, taking the wind out of my sails just a little bit. And that's all you get when you gain a new level; things like health and stamina upgrades are connected to an entirely different system. Raw Science is still worth collecting, though, because it can also be spent at a lab computer on special recipes that can't be unlocked anywhere else, from longer-lasting torches that will let you delve deeper into anthills and spider lairs, to sturdy fortifications that will turn your base into a fortress.

Crafting and construction benefit greatly from the creative setting. Even though you're often making familiar items like swords, chests and walls, every single object reinforces the fact that you're pocket-sized. So instead of making a sword with steel, you'll need to hunt down a deadly mosquito and harvest its proboscis. Tangoing with a flying monster who could potentially kill you with a couple of jabs is just a bit more thrilling than mining and smelting ore. Since *Grounded* runs on cartoon logic, that mosquito sword will also heal you by stealing the blood of your enemies. Isn't nature marvellous?

That logic applies to base building as well, which is flexible and gravity-defying enough to allow you to erect a massive structure that snakes up the side of an oak tree using only twigs and grass. Everything can be recycled, refunding a portion of the cost, while furniture and crafting stations can easily be relocated. It's simple and forgiving enough so that you can really start putting together elaborate builds not long after you arrive in the garden. You'll unlock all the basic parts quickly, and the resources they require can be found nearly everywhere.

ADVENTURE TIME

It can be tempting to focus on perfecting your safe, comfy base, but there's always something nudging you out the door, whether it's the need for food and water, or a new recipe demanding rare resources. What you need might be in an unknown area, and *Grounded* seems to delight in giving you shopping lists full of things you're probably not equipped to find – usually in the form of a limb from a bug that will squash you in seconds. I found that to be a great motivator, though, and there's usually more than one way to get what you need.

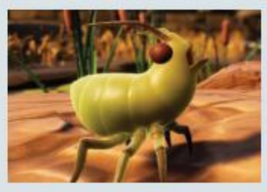
The default settings are well-tuned, delivering a cavalcade of tense but surmountable adventures, but *Grounded* is flexible enough to generate all sorts of survival experiences. If you'd rather build and explore without any risks, you can turn all the threats off, letting you bound around without being worried about starving or becoming spider food. Coupled with its myriad accessibility options, including an arachnophobia mode that turns them into amorphous blobs, this makes it a game with very few barriers and an abundance of tools.

I thought I'd grown tired of survival systems and arduous corpse runs after another ill-fated expedition, but in *Grounded* I haven't been tempted to turn off anything even once. I'd miss trying to dodge bombardier beetle artillery strikes while I'm on a food run or hunkering down under a tree root praying that the prowling spider doesn't notice me. I'm happy to put up with all sorts of obstacles if they're thrilling enough.

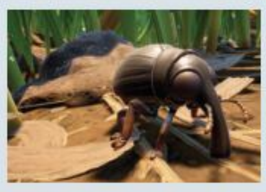
When I was small, I made my plain suburban garden the most exciting place on Earth, and Obsidian has done the same here. I've fought whale-sized carp, ridden ladybirds like an insect-hunting knight and massacred bees on top of forgotten action figures. Every new section of the garden is another alien world waiting to be explored, understood and then conquered. It's the most fun I've had in any survival game so far, even if my fear of spiders has only grown more acute. ■

BEST BUGS

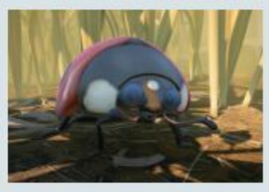
Not all bugs are bad



APHID
This squeaky little guy makes for a tasty snack and produces nectar that can heal and nourish you in a pinch. Make one of them your pet and you'll also be able to sprint for longer.



WEEVIL
Grounded's cutest bug is also, tragically, a great source of food, and will provide you with your first shield. Stop killing them and you can turn them into pets that make you less thirsty.



LADYBUG
This bug is also a hardy warrior that you'll see fighting spiders and other tough guys. Their shells are great for making armour, or you can just jump onto their backs and let them carry you.

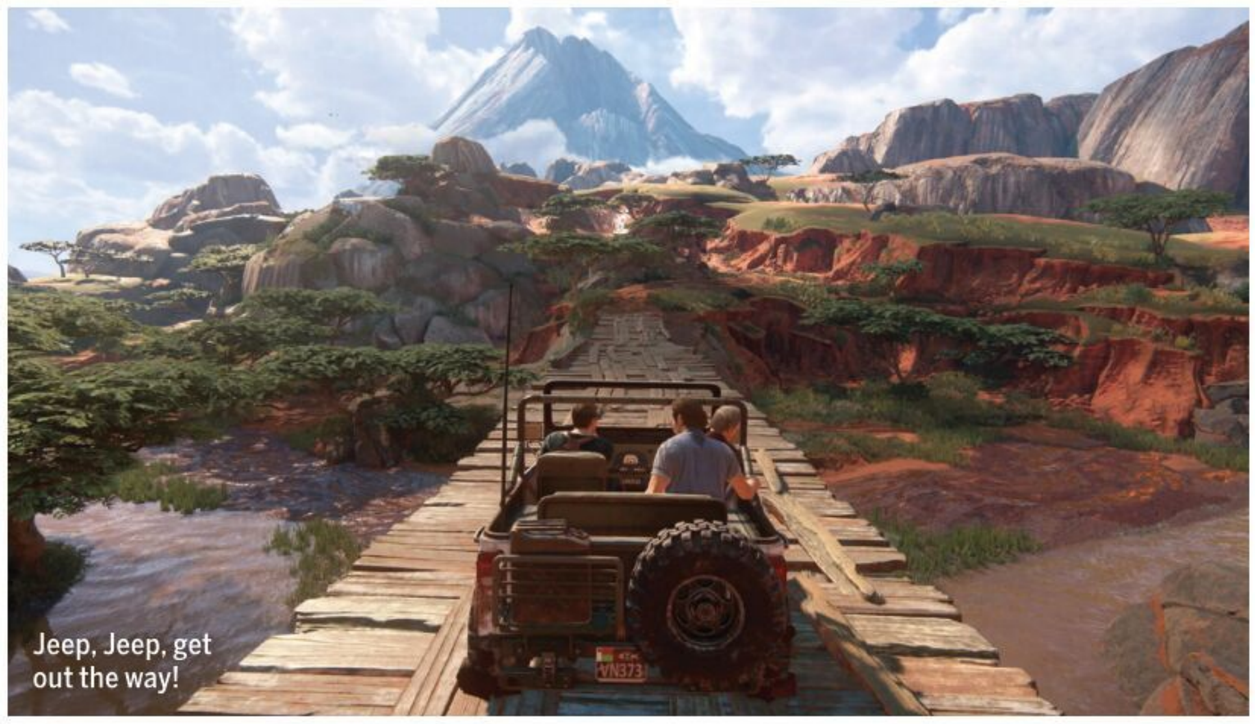
PC PowerPlay VERDICT

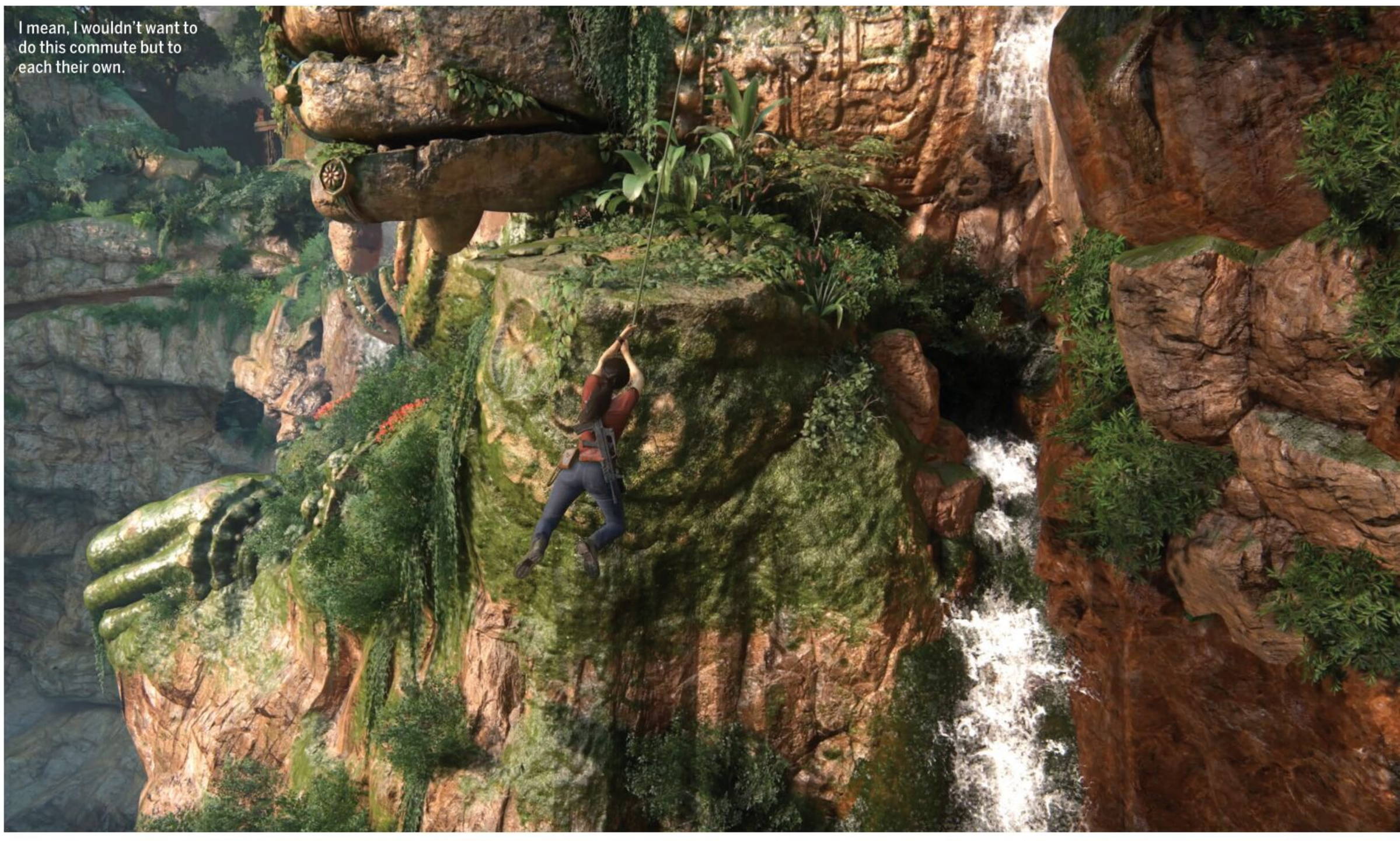
Grounded is a delightfully creative and occasionally terrifying survival sandbox especially for the arachnophobes.

90

ABOVE: Chloe's back and better than ever.

RIGHT: I don't think they'll be needing an MOT this year.





THICK AS THIEVES

UNCHARTED: LEGACY OF THIEVES COLLECTION brings Drake's best adventure to PC

By Imogen Mellor

Uncharted, I've missed you. The reckless personalities, lush environments and ridiculous action set-pieces are unlike anything else we have in games, and coming back to the series with this PC port of the fourth game and its standalone expansion (*The Lost Legacy*) has been a pleasure. I've always loved Nathan Drake because he's a morally grey hero who, with a cheeky quip and mischievous smile, can get away with almost anything.

Where Lara Croft claims she's just an archaeologist, despite her chaotic exploits, Drake and crew are self-confessed thieves, mercenaries and rogues, with silver tongues and dark pasts. In his wake, history is destroyed one collapsing temple at a time, but in the end he always makes the right choice... and ends up no richer than when he started. They're thrilling adventures – and *Uncharted 4* is the best of all of them.

It was and still is the perfect ending to Nathan's story. At the outset, he's given up his life of adventure, living a normal life with love interest Elena – but the arrival of long-lost brother Sam lures him into one final mission. It's a beautifully crafted story that's all the more poignant for its quiet moments, including a perfect scene where Elena and Nathan play *Crash Bandicoot* together – a moment of peace in a game otherwise filled with firefights and close calls.

All that action has aged wonderfully well. As someone who plays a lot of FPS games, I prefer shooting and aiming with a mouse for the combat sections, which are actually more frequent than I remembered. The climbing mechanics are still lovely puzzles you solve as you work your way to a goal, finding the fun in architecture better than the recent *Assassin's Creeds*, and the driving sections are still tense and exciting. Graphically, even going in with the expectation that this is a studio that excels at visuals, it'll still take your breath away.

Six years after its original launch, this is still the best action-adventure game out there. It's a gorgeous, first-class travel package that takes you physically and emotionally to incredible places. The beginning of each area or chapter feels like a red carpet rolling out in front of you, inviting you to experience something new each time. Take in the frozen earth of Scotland, the colourful savannah of Madagascar and the dry evening breeze of Italy. *Uncharted* takes you somewhere and turns it into a playground of chaos to mess around in (and probably blow up on your way out of it).

This is still the best action-adventure game out there

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A story driven action-adventure game about hunting for long-lost treasure

EXPECT TO PAY
$75

DEVELOPER
Naughty Dog

PUBLISHER
PlayStation

REVIEWED ON
Ryzen 5 3600X, 32GB RAM, RTX 2070

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
playstation.com/en-us/uncharted

GET LOST

This collection includes *The Lost Legacy*, a standalone spin-off that started life as DLC before expanding into its own experience. Focusing in on side-characters Chloe and Nadine, it creates a relationship between them that is so well-written and performed that you get to see these two in a way Nathan couldn't. They're independent adventurers carrying the weight of family legacies on their backs, without the luck and luxuries of being a Drake. As they grow from strangers to friends, you come to hope for more dialogue of them exploring their pasts, the gossip of what happened between Chloe and Nathan (especially now he's a married man), and how they came to be the fearless women they are now.

Performance on PC is smooth, and despite its age the game looks brilliant on modern hardware. Clever guidance in the graphics settings shows you what level is possible on your system, which gave me the confidence to crank them up to high. My experience was marred, however, by a strange bug in cutscenes, where characters refused to move or speak their lines – switching to a different machine fixed the problem, so I'm hopeful it's not a widespread issue.

The *Uncharted: Legacy of Thieves Collection* is a great addition to Sony's PC catalogue, whether you're playing these games for the first time or just taking the excuse to experience them again. *Uncharted 4* and *The Lost Legacy* are the pinnacles of what the last generation of consoles achieved, up there with many modern classics, and still well-worth your time. I've missed *Uncharted*, and I'm so glad I got the opportunity to see Nathan Drake's last adventure once again. ■

LOST AND FOUND

Nadine and Chloe are a fearsome pair

1 Nadine Ross is the head of Shoreline, a mercenary outfit left to her by her father and the bad guys of *Uncharted 4*.

2 Originally from South Africa, she's travelled all over the world – but still dreams of visiting Iceland.

3 Chloe Frazer was introduced in *Uncharted 2* as a femme fatale to lead Nathan astray.

4 She's Drake's equal in combat and adventure, but more flexible when it comes to her moral scruples.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

Nathan Drake's last outing in the *Legacy of Thieves Collection* is still at the top of the action-adventure genre.

91

COOL TITLES FOR NO CASH by Tom Sykes

Farm Work
As you make your way past a lone farm, you spot a Farmer standing on the edge of the property. He calls you over and tells you he's looking for help.
He smiles and asks,
"What can you do for me, partner?"
Dead Horse
He's overjoyed with your offer of a Dead Horse ride. Y'all have a nice time and he gives you something for your troubles.
Keep Dead Horse
+1 Money
DONE
Money
1

DEAL WITH IT

Life is a pack of cards in creative adventure **CARD COWBOY**

Cards and the Old West go together like fireside beans and competitive farting, so it's not a stretch to see them as the premise for this text-based adventure. *Card Cowboy* is a narrative sandbox that sets you off on a revenge mission – a stranger has seduced your mum, murdered your dad, and perhaps worst of all kicked your dog – but how you achieve it really depends on what's in your hand.

Luckily, said stranger has set up camp at the edge of the map. To confront them, you have to travel from node to node, resolving events with the aid of your cards, while acquiring a hand you can draw on for your showdown.

There's an event at each location – be it an oasis out in the wilderness, a farm, church, or town – and every event holds a number of logical or silly solutions. To pick one example, after meeting a farmer's son/daughter you could play your Horse card to take them for a romantic ride. This plops the Wedding card into your hand, which can then be exchanged for a Wife or Husband down the line. But you could also play your Money card, which your love interest interprets as an insult. You're given a Whisky card to help drown your sorrows.

You can sort of guess the outcomes of both these scenarios, but *Card Cowboy* is at its best when you use the more *ridiculous* cards, just to see what happens.

Card Cowboy is at its best when you use the more ridiculous cards

So, you play the Tragic Accident card on the unfortunate son or daughter. They slip on a pitchfork, die, and you end up lugging their Dead Body around. Or you put forth the Cowboy who's been following you around. They fall in love with the son/daughter, and both bugger off, leaving a bottle of Whisky as a parting shot.

CARD COUNTING

Now you've probably noticed, but in almost every encounter you're given *more* cards due to your meddling, which keeps the mine cart rolling as you hurtle to the denouement.

It sounds great, doesn't it? And *yeah*, sometimes it's how I've described it, while at others it's a source of disappointment. When my Horse turned into Dead Horse, I figured *that should be good for a laugh*. However, every time I played it, the game just treated it as a living one. Similarly, playing the Murder card at a confessional booth should surely create an *amazing* anecdote, but it just spouted a disappointing stock response.

The game could do with more content – more responses that take your cards into account, so you don't feel like you're collecting jokes without punchlines. But while there's not quite enough of it, what's here is gorgeously presented and, occasionally, very funny. Pick a card, any card, and jump in. ■

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Interactive cowboy fiction where you solve problems with cards

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Chris Wade and others

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-10750H, 16GB RAM, GeForce RTX 2060

MULTIPLAYER
No

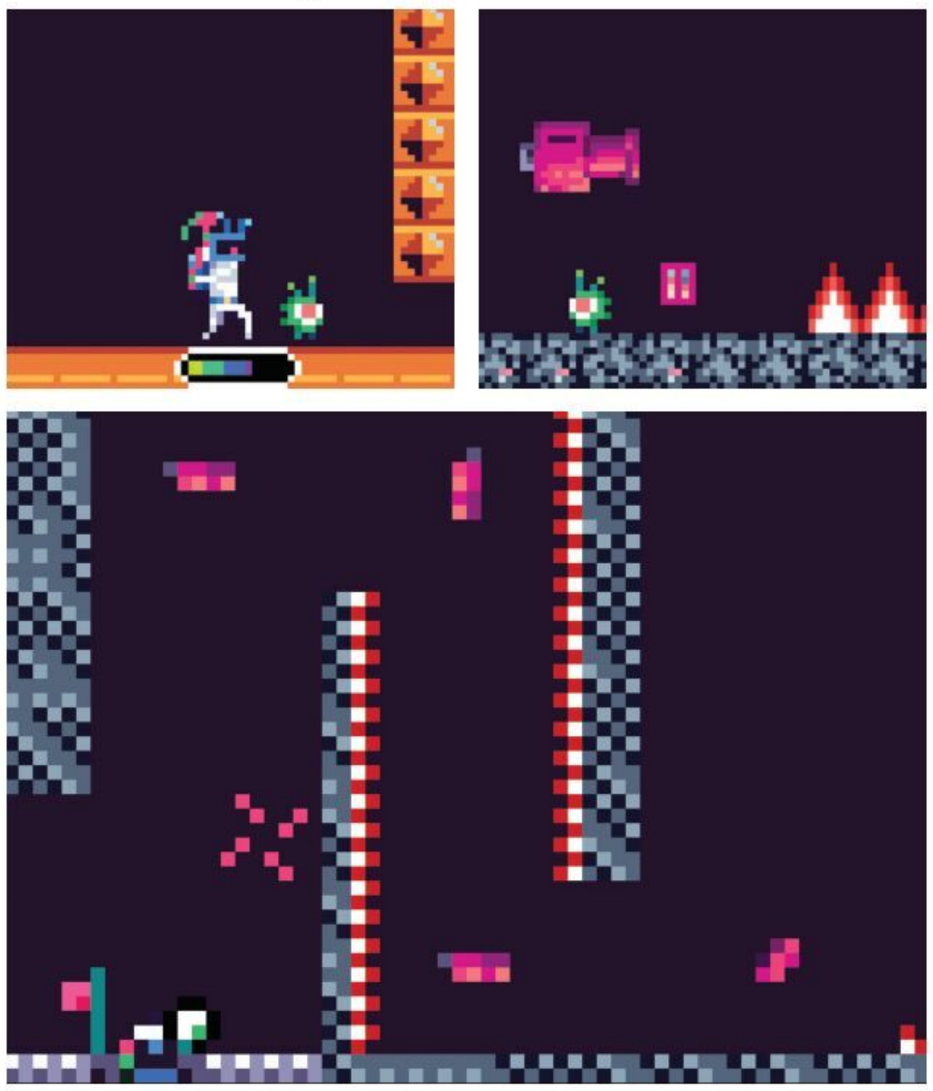
LINK
bit.ly/CardCowboy

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

A funny Wild West parody with a nifty card system that rewards experimentation – just not as much as I'd like.

73

BOTTOM: It's cute, seeing even tinier versions of the characters.



PUTT ROGERS

Now watch this warp drive in sci-fi golfing game ZOLF

You can fit a surprising amount into a 64x64 resolution. For example, a whole golf-based platformer, with a world to traverse and plenty of things to whack with your iron. That is, if you don't mind pixels the size of your head, or playing in a window on your monitor.

A submission to (and winner of) this year's LOWREZJAM, *Zolf* is a glorious mash-up of golf and 2D platformer, where you solve puzzles with the aid of your tire iron and a little ball-shaped alien. After crash-landing on a planet, your only hope of escape is to repeatedly whack the alien with a slender stick – punting the critter to too-high ledges, where it can get to work flipping switches that will let you progress. You control both the golf-playing humanoid and the cute, rotund critter, and there's some pleasant, puzzling as you switch between the pair to get past each screen.

It's not *tough* puzzling, but it is a joy to play out, as the game introduces new elements to keep things interesting. It's also a bit of a looker (though 4K diehards may disagree), its diminutive pixel art brimming with character, and an imposed resolution limit that doesn't get in the way of the action.

At the touch of a button you can zoom in or out, to a view that makes it easier to plan your trajectory. It makes the golf part actually doable, and satisfying too. It's a smooth transition, but not as snappy as I'd like. The slight delay gives you less time to react after taking a swing.

Small complaints really, in a golf game that feels bigger than the borders of its tiny window. ■

75

NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY	DEVELOPER	LINK
Free	Ismael Rodriguez etc	bit.ly/GolfGame

HOUSE PROUD

Burgle an abandoned mansion in THE SPOOKY HOUSE

The word 'spooky' really tells you everything. This browser game might take place in a house with monsters in it, but they're not scary at all, and they're not out to get you. They're obstacles, or puzzle pieces – links in a sublime puzzle chain, in this streamlined and minimalist adventure game.

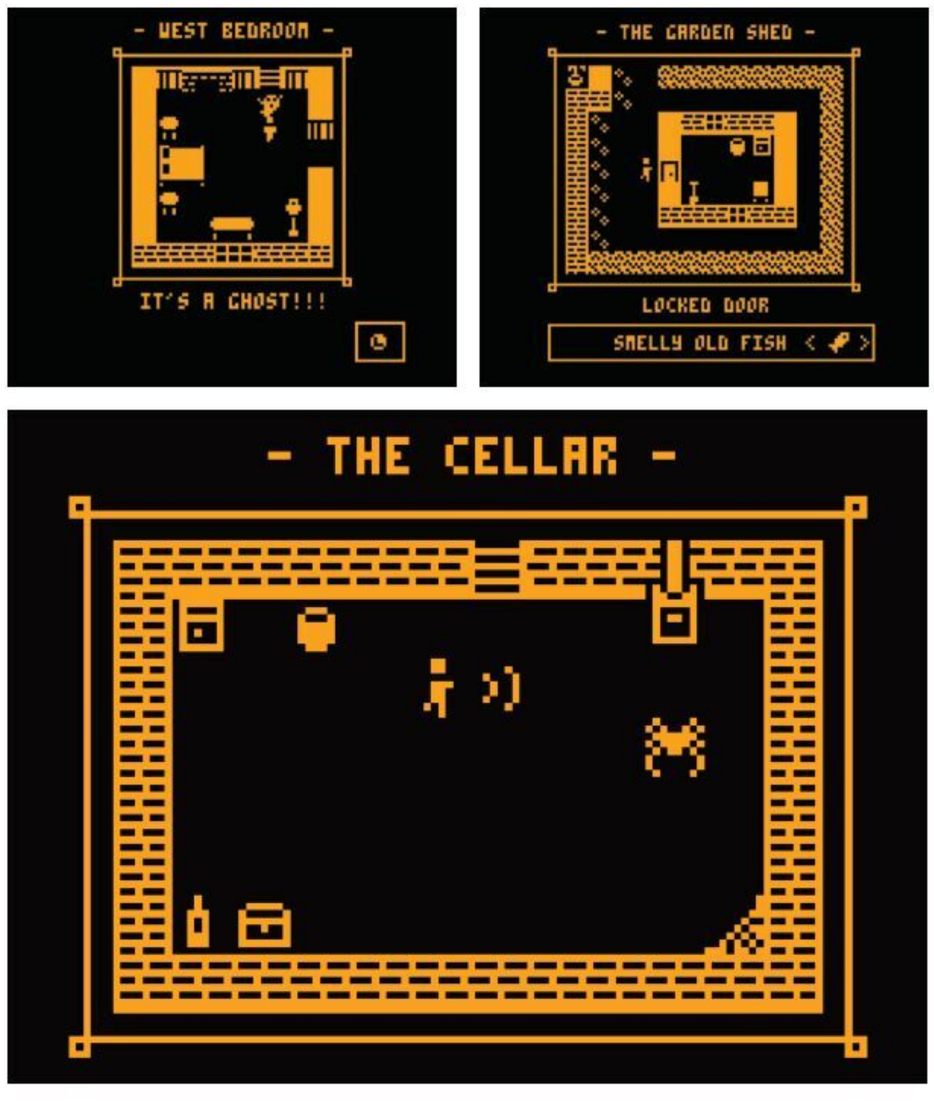
Though it looks small, *The Spooky House* is actually a sizeable game, full of items to pick up and places to use them, with stripped-down inventory management that makes it playable with a single button. And, well, the cursor keys, which move the little person around. Breaking into an abandoned mansion to search for some missing diamonds, you'll have to poke into every nook and cranny to find them. Your interaction key is Z: it picks up items, when the prompt appears. It's also how you retrieve them from your inventory, by holding it down. Another tap of Z will let you use the item held in your hand. It's a beautiful simplification of potentially complex inventory management.

I like an adventure game with a big inventory, full of items to examine and combine and experiment with, but I also enjoy Spooky's slickly linear approach. The house is a clockwork chain of puzzle-solving: you clear the ghost with the torch, you attract the fly with the dead fish, you take the dead fish to the cat to get it out of the way. These are not hard puzzles, but they're crunchy enough to make it satisfying to gradually unlock the mansion.

You'll come to know every inch of the game, which succeeds in creating a spooky atmosphere, with just a single colour. ■

79

BOTTOM: You've snuck into the house to search for some diamonds.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY	DEVELOPER	LINK
Free	Spookysoft	bit.ly/TheSpookyHouse

OLD GAMES REVISITED by Matthew Elliott

ANGEL GRINDER

Making celestial beings cry in BAYONETTA

Many consider it poor form to begin a review with an anecdote. But, at the same time, I urgently need to tell you that I just conjured a hair dragon from a swirling portal so it could swallow whole an angelic cherub golem. Also, my clothes disappeared. This partially describes *Bayonetta*'s delirious proposition: finding a balance between desperate titillation and scandalous power fantasy.

The lengthy cutscenes would have you believe it's more complicated than that. They present a story that's both crudely drawn and dizzyingly confusing. Clumsy, fuhgeddaboudit spivs reside in a setting cribbed straight from Dante's Divine Comedy. None of it makes much sense, most of it is a struggle to comprehend, and 'sexy amnesiac witch' sounds like something from a list of forbidden bedroom roleplays.

When you actually get to play it, *Bayonetta* is a masterpiece

And, yet, when you actually get to play it, *Bayonetta* is simply a masterpiece. It's a game that lets me kick angels into torture racks and shoot enemies with my gun feet. I can do combat handstands, and summon ten-foot stilettos from the ether. There's a *sass button*. The whole thing is forged from the sort of grand, relentless set pieces that make most action adventure games look like an AMSR video about maps. And, despite the fact that Bayonetta herself is not so much a person as a seven-foot Wankenstein's monster of every horndog fantasy committed to teenage bed sheets, she still manages to be somehow inspiring.

CHEESED OFF

That strutting self confidence is everywhere in *Bayonetta*. Even the opening scene is a flex: you'll have to wait for your gentle, ease-in tutorial, my dears. That comes after the bit where you fight God's legions on the underside of a falling clock tower. Enemy design is straight out of bits of the bible everyone is too afraid to illustrate.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Pornhub made a rhythm action game about torturing angels

EXPECT TO PAY
$25

DEVELOPER
PlatinumGames

PUBLISHER
SEGA

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-7700 CUP @ 3.60GHz, 16 GB RAM, NVIDIA GeForce GTX 1070, Windows 10

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
bit.ly/3SdDL82

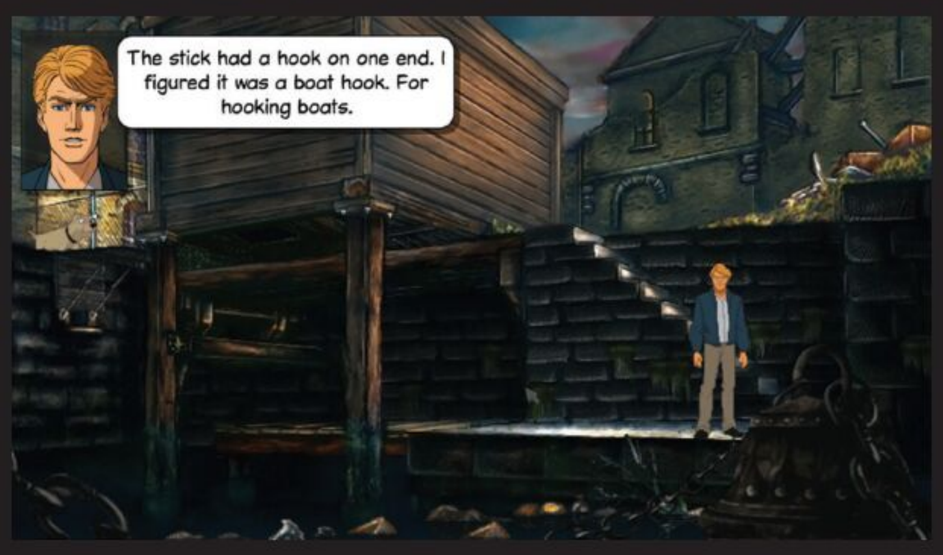
Never mind the infanticide and plagues and torture: this is a place where the angels are made out of countless faces and shimmering wings; the sort of creatures conjured to make the devil himself sleep with the big light on. The difficulty is about right, too. Occasional spikes can slow you down, but most of the time it's your own desire to dance away from every attack and build the meatiest combo that brings a sense of challenge. In fact, the delirious fun of it all almost does the hammy, cheesefest story a slight disservice. Perhaps, against expectation, every beat of Bayonetta's journey towards self actualisation is worth savouring. But smacking up endless waves of enemies with luscious spin kicks is so good that I can barely pay attention when the action stops and the characters start talking. All I want to do is unlock more ways to humiliate the heavenly host. ■

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

The best game about using high-heels to kill heavenly messengers that isn't a *Bayonetta* sequel.

89

BELOW: Neither crockery not art critic were safe from Stobbart's black fury.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER
$8	Revolution Software Ltd	In-house

MAYAN SHARONA

Happiness in BROKEN SWORD 2: THE SMOKING MIRROR

Before the Marvel movies, before *Uncharted*, there was one master of the post-trauma quip. His name was George Stobbart and he was a patent lawyer from Idaho.

Over time, George became more rugged and cynical before reverting to type for *Broken Sword 5*. But this iteration of him, drawn by Dave Gibbons and voiced by Rolf Saxon, is one of the most relatable and understated characters in gaming. There's something reassuring about the fate of civilisation being placed in the hands of a man who's happy to make gentle jokes while tied to a chair in a burning room. The plot doesn't have the same conspiratorial wallop as the first game, but this is still thigh-slapping stuff. It's the sort of game that celebrates the varied functionality of everyday objects.

A boat hook in a *Broken Sword* game, for example, will never be used for its intended purpose: in George's hands it's a dog-botherer and fan-stopper. It's as satisfying and empowering as using your door key to slice tape off a reluctant parcel. It's refreshing, too, playing as aggressively Gallic holiday romance Nico Collard, even if she does spend the first quarter of the game, to use George's words, trussed up like a chicken. Like the original, there's something simple and crisp and endearing about *Broken Sword 2* – a hidden treasure from a time when kidnapped girlfriends don't get fridged, every corner of the world is only a cutscene away, and protagonists could save humanity while wearing a side-parting and slacks. Five extra points for the cheesy theme tune. ■

80

IN THE RIBS

SHANK you for the memories (of my murdered lover)

We'll finish this month's list of blade-adjacent titles with a tonal U-turn. We're leaving the reassuring nuzzle of point-and-click conspiracy behind and replacing it with the strangling hands of *Shank*: a game where being stabbed in the head is as close as you'll get to dying peacefully in your sleep.

It's slightly jarring, because at first glance *Shank* looks like that should be on Cartoon Network after Dexter's Lab. It's only when you discover your standard heavy attack is an *actual goddamn chainsaw* that you realise you're actually playing hatred shaped like a game. If Danny Trejo brought out his own aftershave, Shank is what it would smell like. It's a tale of dead pregnant girlfriends and bloodied headbands and elephantine Mexican wrestlers with Betty Page tattoos.

Literally everyone, from bartenders to ring announcers, is built like a steroid-pumped gargoyle. Tonally, it's easy to admire the game's dedication to tequila-swigging, Latin American excess. Mechanically, it's a repetitive side-scrolling eviscerate-'em-up. The score attack stuff is fun – especially when you get to juggle the limp bodies of your enemies to increase your combo length – but there's little in the way of variety here. You unlock a stack of new weapons as you progress, but the basic premise remains 'run right and kill everything'. It's so slickly done that it's quite often easy to forget that you've been doing the same thing for the last 25 minutes. But once you realise you're an emotionally ruptured hamster, it sometimes leads to moments of wretched introspection. ■

68

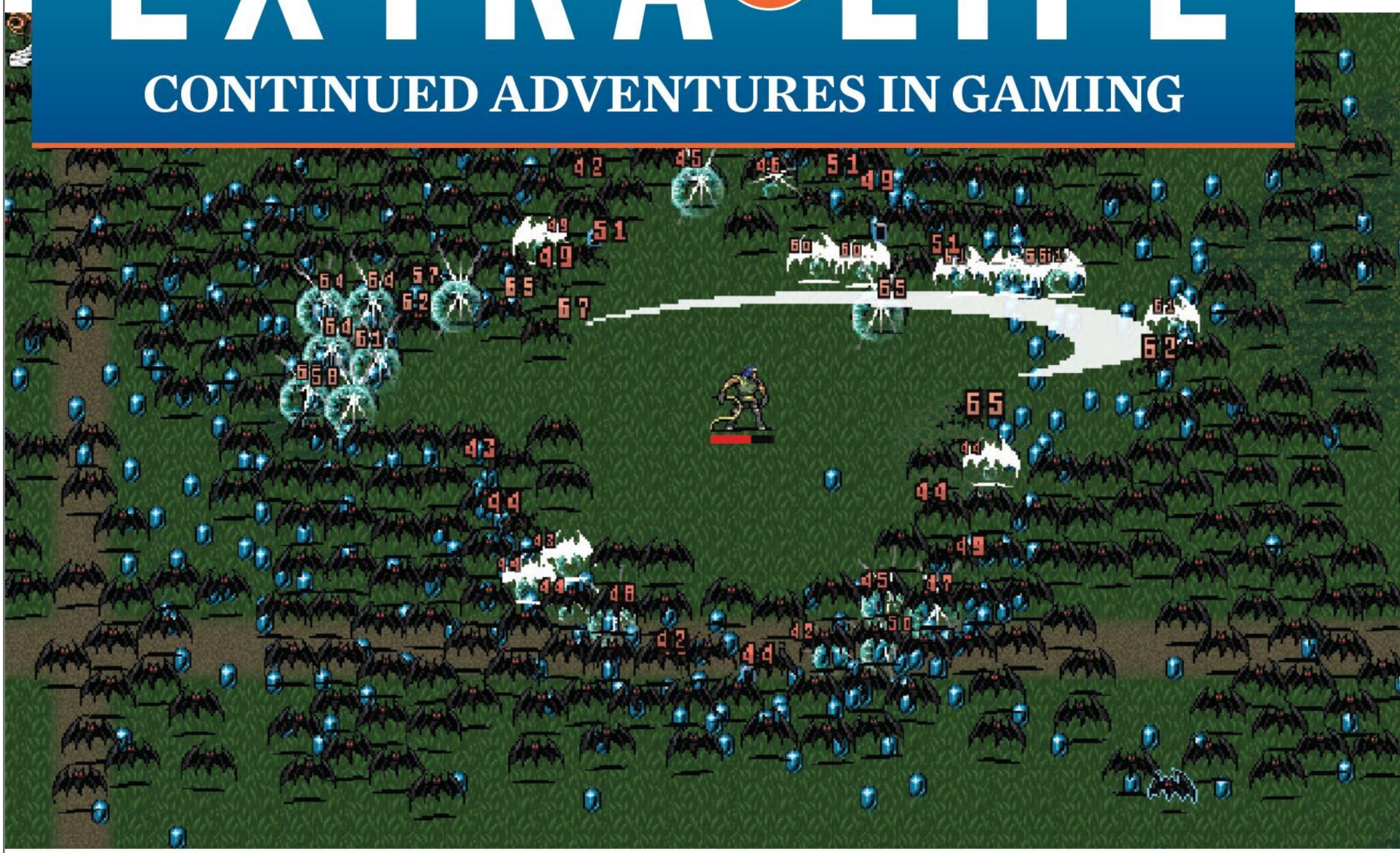
BELOW: It's not a red headband, yeah. It's a *white one covered in blood.*

NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER
$14	Klei Entertainment	In-house

EXTRA LIFE

CONTINUED ADVENTURES IN GAMING



"Every attack is automatic. But that doesn't mean you're not involved"

Ugly roguelite **VAMPIRE SURVIVORS** has taken over my Steam Deck

Thank Gabe for my Steam Deck. If it wasn't for Valve's handheld miracle, I'd know nothing of the joys of *Vampire Survivors*, thus allowing the vampires to win. Before the Deck arrived, I'd heard of *Vampire Survivors*, of course, but it was hard to see the appeal, even amid its growing popularity. There are few places as saturated as the indie roguelike space, and it just looked like another ugly, pixely time sink designed to kill me over and over again.

My Steam Deck's arrival heralded a new obsession: trying to play every game I can think of on the device. I've tried everything from *Cyberpunk 2077* to *World of Warcraft*, and I've been surprised by how many unverified games work. *Vampire Survivors* is verified, though, and one of the most played games on the Deck, which is what inspired me to try it for myself.

FRASER BROWN

THIS MONTH
Killed millions of monsters from the comfort of my bed.

ALSO PLAYED
Sunless Skies, *Pathfinder: Wrath of the Righteous*

I underestimated how much delight this ugly duckling would bring me. Most roguelikes, roguelites, and bullet hell romps leave you feeling vulnerable until you've really got to grips with them, but *Vampire Survivors* lets you feel like a god of death within 15 minutes. Runs are short, there's nowhere to hide, but also no labyrinths to explore, so you're perpetually running around murdering stuff and taking their gems to bolster your power through new unlocks and upgrades. It's constant, unrelenting progression, and if you can just survive for a few more seconds you know you're going to unlock another big boost to your destructive capabilities.

It's probably worth noting at this point that you don't actually need to do anything to start the slaughter. Every attack is automatic, but that doesn't mean you're not involved. Some abilities need you to face the direction of your quarry, while others benefit from huge crowds of monsters, inspiring you to risk

TOP: Where do these bats keep finding gems?

EVERY ATTACK IS AUTOMATIC, BUT THAT DOESN'T MEAN YOU'RE NOT INVOLVED

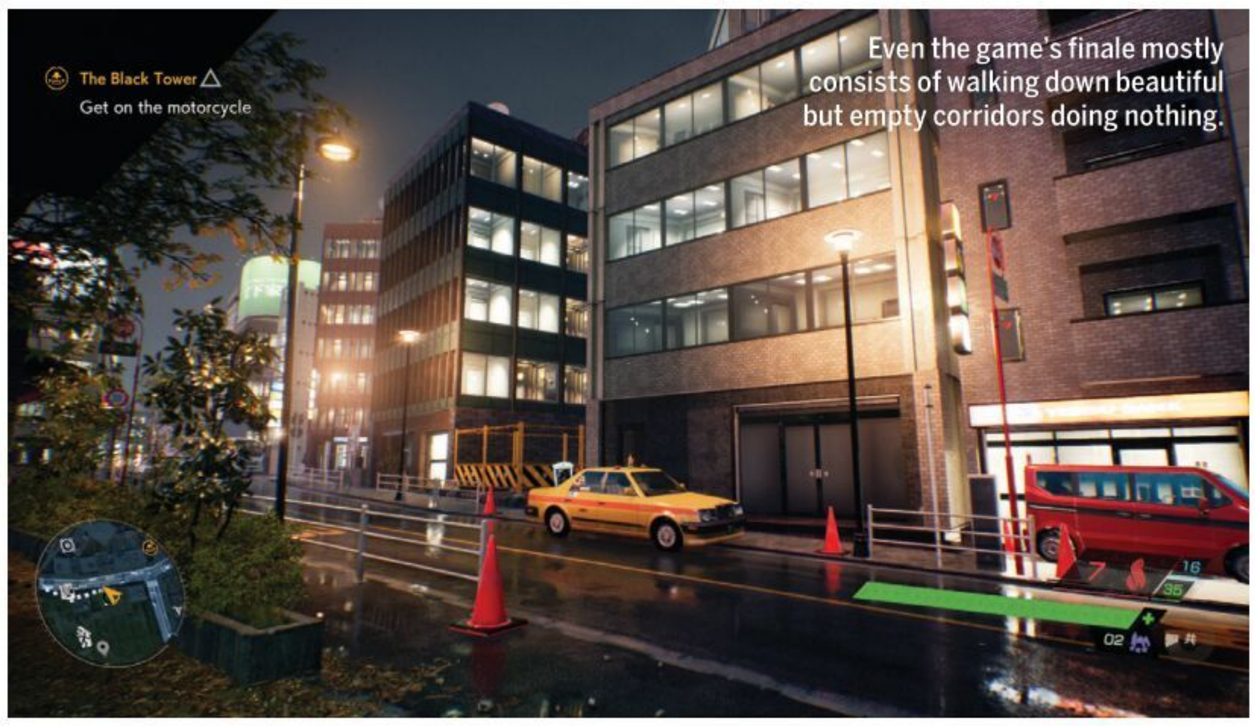
staying still and letting a horde of them accumulate and come to you.

BAD BREATH

This is why I love garlic. In *Vampire Survivors* it's especially handy, giving you an aura that damages enemies who get too close, which can be upgraded to do more damage and harm enemies that are further away. So if I get garlic and some random AoE abilities early on, I put down roots and just wait. The low-level monsters who get too close get murdered by garlic, while the ones in the back get struck by lightning.

Since you're able to experiment with screen-clearing strategies right from the get-go, you can probably imagine how powerful you'll be just 15 minutes down the line. And by the end, you'll hardly be able to see the monsters under the constant string of damage numbers and ability effects.

The only downside of all this is that it's so compelling that I don't have much time to check out the 30 other games I've installed on my Deck. I'll flit about in my space locomotive in *Sunless Skies* for an hour or knock out a few quests in *Pathfinder: Wrath of the Righteous*, but the allure of *Vampire Survivors* always pulls me back in. ■


The Black Tower △
Get on the motorcycle
Even the game's finale mostly consists of walking down beautiful but empty corridors doing nothing.

"A city with barely anything to do"

Feeling alone in GHOSTWIRE TOKYO

ROBIN VALENTINE

THIS MONTH
Learned that umbrellas can turn into demons. Be careful.

ALSO PLAYED
Rollerdrome, Nioh 2, Gotham Knights

The sheer atmosphere of *Ghostwire Tokyo* is hard to beat. Out on the streets of the city, monsters roam by the light of neon signs and glowing phonebooths; inside the buildings, eerie stillness gives way to ghostly manifestations that make walls shift and paintings bleed.

It's all the more chilling for its emptiness. The entire populace has been turned to spirits by a dark ritual, so suddenly that their clothes and belongings are left in little piles wherever you go. As you adventure across the city, the only things that move other than you are ghosts and monsters, and even they are rare.

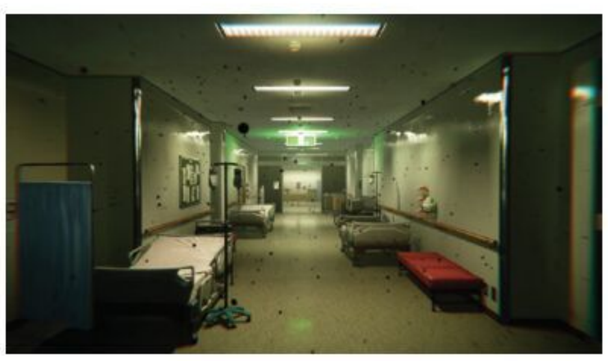
But... there can be such a thing as *too* much atmosphere, y'know? For as much as *Ghostwire Tokyo*'s haunting vibes are impeccable, it feels like the developers ran out of time to make a game in its empty playground. The absence of another living soul is spooky, but it also just emphasises the sparseness of the world, a city with barely anything to do or see other than hovering collectibles and the same four enemy types repeated ad nauseam.

SPIRITED AWAY

Those surreal indoor sequences are visually sumptuous, but they're all smoke and mirrors. Because the spaces are too small for fights, and the game has no other activities to offer, all that can happen is you walk through the haunted house and then click on a ghost to exorcise it. Beautifully crafted locations in desperate need of a purpose.

The sidequests are wonderfully conceived – full of lovely tidbits of Japanese folklore and tradition. But not only do they struggle to give you any actual tasks to perform other than walking from one spot to another, the game's quiet artificiality makes them feel futile. What's the point of solving problems for ghosts in an empty city? Why does it matter if this monster or that is terrorising streets that no one lives on anymore?

Ultimately all that can matter is restoring the bustling status quo that the game can never actually let you explore. I'm left hoping for a more ambitious and complete sequel – perhaps one that confines that emptiness to the hidden places of an otherwise living city, and invites you to be a true investigator, instead of just a ghost-killer. ■



"I decided to put my ego aside and actually use some of the junk"

Putting seven years worth of ROCKET LEAGUE cosmetics to use

My *Rocket League* inventory looks like the inside of one of those antique shops full of vintage pins, Raggedy Ann dolls, and ceramic beer steins. I have a floppy cow udder hat, eight variants of wheels with 3D elf faces on them, a Game Awards statue, a Wonder Woman flag, various animal miniatures, a Hot Wheels sign, and hundreds of other items that no one actually uses, including me.

I could trade some of them in, selecting five unwanted items at a time to smush into one rarer one, but I hate deciding what to keep and what to scrap. It may be trash, but it's trash I've collected over seven years. It has sentimental value! And what if I want to make a Christmas-themed car one day, only to discover that I threw out my 2018 Frosty Fest candy cane speed trail? I'd be devastated.

I'll probably never want to do that, granted. The few *Rocket League* cosmetics I actually use strike a calculated balance between showiness and modesty. You've got to use a couple high rarity cosmetics so that people know you're an old-timer, but either stop there or use a few common items to show that you value good taste over ostentation.

TYLER WILDE

THIS MONTH
Ruined a perfectly good car preset.

ALSO PLAYED
Hyper Demon, Rainbow Six Siege

FAST FASHION

In a self-critical moment the other day, though, I decided to put my ego aside and actually use some of the junk I claim to care about. At first, I went gross: floppy udder hat, gooey pizza wheels, pie texture. The resulting car was hideous, but too matchy to be genuinely tasteless. I replaced the udder with a giant foam cowboy hat to disrupt the food theme, but it still felt too self-aware, and looked sort of fun. Swapping the pie paint for a Bronze rank season reward decal made it uglier – a dull plasticky brown – but even less sincere. No one would actually flaunt the decal you get for a last place competitive ladder finish.

NO ONE WOULD ACTUALLY FLAUNT THE DECAL YOU GET FOR LAST PLACE

As I scrolled quickly past a pair of Rick and Morty toppers, I noticed an odd sensation: it was like I was trying to hide them from myself, afraid that I might actually feel embarrassed if I made myself use them. When I put Mr Poopybutthole on the roof of my car, I knew I had conquered my ego. I stuck the Reddit alien on my antenna in reference to a T-shirt I unfortunately wore in a few mid-2000s photos and picked a set of wheels covered in irredeemable hot pick camo netting. I selected the car body I used back in 2015, a Mad Max-style armoured vehicle called Ripper, which no one uses these days, and put my Season 12 Diamond rank decal on it, which is actually the best competitive reward I have, and something I was actually proud of. Finally, I'd made a truly bad car. I've never actually used it, of course. I have a reputation to uphold. ■

The worst *Rocket League* car I've ever designed.

LEFT: A preset I actually use.

BELOW: Cow pie.

"This game is janky, unpredictable, thoroughly imperfect, and I love it"

Feeling horror at what I have wrought in CREATURE CREATOR

S*pore* is one of those games I've been long curious about, but never got around to playing. I know enough, however, to recognise that this is basically a Poundland version of it. As a result, this might be the only game I've ever played where I would have been happy to have paid five times the asking price.

This game is janky, unpredictable, thoroughly imperfect, and I love it. It's a bundle of contradictions. There are dozens of little touches that I adore. The way that the screen is black and white until you place eyes on your creature; the fact that one of the maps (a literal sandbox) has multiple footballs, two huge buckets for goals, and a working scoreboard; the fact that, although it's a zero-budget endeavour, you can meet and chat with fellow creators online. Making and testing something, though, is an exercise in equal parts frustration and hilarity.

It's wonderful and smooth in *theory*. Creation is user-friendly for the most part. Basically, you stretch out and shape the body, then start sticking things like legs and eyes onto it. That's pretty much all there is to it. Whether what you make bears any resemblance to what you had planned is an entirely different story. A story with an ending that is either sad or indescribably funny depending on your perspective.

Creature Creator is a real monkey's paw of wish fulfilment. Everything, and I mean *everything*, that I've made so far is nightmare fuel, whether I wanted it to be or not. The one I keep coming back to is my two-headed giant insect thing. I wanted it to look disturbing, and it does. Once it gets moving, however, it's disturbing in entirely the wrong way.

What bothers me is the leg movement. I don't know how this happened – maybe the body's not far enough off the ground, maybe I've put the legs on at the wrong angle, perhaps the weight distribution is off – but whenever this thing walks, it swings its hips around in a sexually suggestive manner.

LUKE KEMP

THIS MONTH
Created unspeakable horrors for your entertainment.

ALSO PLAYED
Return to Monkey Island, Rakuen, Gotham Knights

CREATURE CREATOR IS A REAL MONKEY'S PAW OF WISH FULFILMENT

CREATE EXPECTATIONS

My tour de force is the result of my asking, "How close can I get to a human?" It's a bipedal monstrosity that needs a new word to describe it, waddling around bow-legged as it does with a crown atop its head.

From others I've seen Hellraiser's version of Sonic, some good Pokémon, and a version of Kirby that will haunt me. It's broken, it's glitchy as hell, and it's endless fun. ■

ELDEN RING

Big changes, big teases. *By Tyler Colp*

Their boring, numerical names might not seem like much, but *Elden Ring*'s post-release patches have changed a lot about the game. The latest update, 1.07, completely transforms how PvP will work going forward, buffs several weapons, and teases the DLC that everyone has been waiting for.

The 1.07 update does what MMOs have done for years: it makes stats scale differently in PvP than they do in PvE. For the first time in a FromSoftware game, weapons, skills, spells, and incantations will do different amounts of damage to other players than they do to AI-controlled enemies. This is a huge change for every *Elden Ring* PvP player that was sad when the frigid Hoarfrost Stomp attack was nerfed for its busted effects against bosses. Now, everything is separate, which benefits everyone.

PvP in *Elden Ring* is a popular style of play. Not long after the game launched earlier this year, players found tons of different weapons and spells to catch their opponents off-guard. Some were legitimately unfair, but others, like the ability to deflect spells with a magical shield, were a clever use of the game's mostly PvE-focused gear. Patch 1.07 drops buffs for a lot of popular PvP weapons, including the Eclipse Shotel, the Grave Scythe and the annoyingly popular Winged Scythe. It also increases every weapon's poise damage, which determines how easy it is to stagger your enemy.

Popular spells like Glintstone Pebble now have increased damage. The ever nasty Poison Mist builds poison status faster than before. And Magic Glintblade, the spell that lets you summon a huge magical sword, received a massive buff against players who try to shield themselves against its attacks. If you entered the PvP battlefield as a sorcerer, you should have a whole set of solutions to whatever problems melee users throw at you.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
Feb 24, 2022

DEVELOPER
FromSoftware

PUBLISHER
Bandai Namco

LINK
bit.ly/3CZMiHi

TEASE AND THANK YOU

Elden Ring's patch 1.07 doesn't mention what changed deep in the game's code. Not only is there a reference to ray tracing for anyone who wants fancy lighting and reflections in an already gorgeous game, but it also has a reference to two new locations without names.

According to *Elden Ring* dataminer and modder Zullie the Witch, the game's files point to two locations with IDs that suggest one of them is a sprawling Legacy Dungeon, like Stormveil Castle, and the other is... well, unknown for now. *Elden Ring*'s zones are given IDs that correspond to the type of area they are. Legacy Dungeons are marked as "m20", small, side dungeons are "m30", and the open world areas are "m60". The new, unnamed area is "m20", which isn't an ID that the game uses anywhere else.

It could mean nothing, but it also could mean everything. The *Dark Souls* series and *Bloodborne* have famous DLC that expand on the base games and offer characters and areas that are tremendous. *Dark Souls*' *Artorias of the Abyss* DLC wraps the game up so well that when the game came to PC, it was included in the package by default. *Dark Souls 2*'s three pieces of DLC play with the format of a typical level by asking you to avoid traps, solve puzzles, and take part in a glorious arena battle with allies.

PVP IN ELDEN RING IS A POPULAR STYLE OF PLAY

WAIT AND DLC

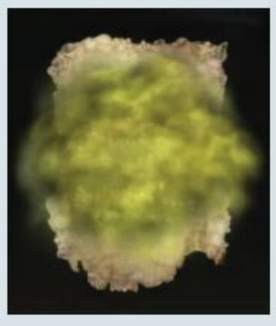
The inevitable *Elden Ring* DLC could mix up what you would expect after playing the game for 200 hours. Several months ago, there was a supposed leak of the DLC title: *Barbarians of the Badlands*. Whether we travel back in time to where one of the game's most important characters came from or we go there in its current state, there are a lot of questions that could be answered about the nature of the Erdtree and how the land itself was warped from its influence. There's even a theory that the Badlands were what the hellish Caelid was called before it became a Petri dish.

If this code is a clue, *Elden Ring* DLC might be out soon. I can't wait to dig in, get crushed by some horrible monster, and see what weird and powerful weapons I can find. And even if it doesn't answer all of my lore questions, the DLC will likely give some extra insight into *Elden Ring's* strange and fascinating world. ■

GEAR UP *Updated tools to excel in PvP*

BLOODHOUND'S FANG
A popular choice just got better with increased poise damage.

ECLIPSE SHOTEL
Its special Death Flare attack does a heck of lot more damage now.



POISON MIST
The faster poison build-up supplements a low DPS build.

ORACLE BUBBLES
You can finally spam these while sprinting around your opponent.

INESCAPABLE FRENZY
This fiery spell now uses less FP and stamina to make enemies perish.

I hope we can go back underground in the DLC areas.

ABOVE: Bleed builds remain strong in PvP.

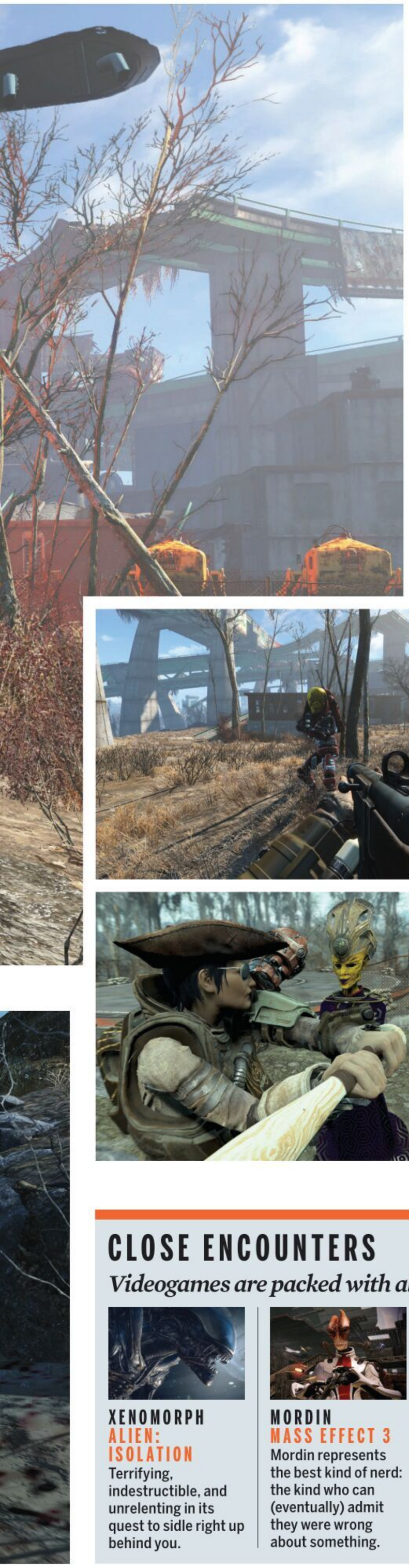
LEFT: Frost buildup helps slow down fast PvP enemies.

Magic still prevails in PvP if your intelligence is high enough.

Major mods, analysed

ABOVE: Some alien tech for the Commonwealth.

RIGHT: The invasion has begun.



LEFT: UFOs blow up real good.

BELOW: Shotguns are great for close encounters.

ZETANS!

Flying saucers invade *Fallout 4*. *By Christopher Livingston*

F*allout* games and aliens are no strangers. In *Fallout 2* a crashed flying saucer can be found with two alien skeletons inside. In *Fallout: New Vegas,* another spaceship and more aliens can be spotted. *Fallout 3* has DLC that actually lets you board an alien spacecraft called Mothership Zeta. And in *Fallout 4*, there's yet another crashed flying saucer, and one angry alien survivor.

Maybe it's time the aliens stopped flirting with the world of *Fallout* and just got down to business. Maybe it's time for a .full-scale alien invasion. That's where the *Zetans!* mod created by modder RascalArt comes in. They know we're here, and we know they're here. It drops the pretence and lets the invasion finally begin.

THE ARRIVAL

Granted, the aliens in the *Zetans!* mod won't run up and introduce themselves the moment you step out of the Vault. After installing the mod, I still had to go out into the world and find them. So I set out from my settlement at Sanctuary to see if I could have a close encounter of the violent kind. A good place to start seemed like the vanilla game's crashed spaceship near Oberland Station, but I didn't spot any living aliens there so I moved on.

It didn't take long. While I was running toward a ruined bridge in the Commonwealth, I heard what I thought was a Brotherhood of Steel vertibird powering up. Since those armoured do-gooders always seem to be on their way to a fight, I decided to follow them around to the nearest source of trouble. Instead of raiders or ghouls, maybe this time it would be alien invaders.

Well, I was half-right. As I got closer to the sound, it wasn't a vertibird that rose up from behind the bridge, it was a flying saucer. I don't know if you'll believe this, but in all my hours of *Fallout 4* it was one of the coolest things I've ever seen.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
November 10, 2015

DEVELOPER
Bethesda

PUBLISHER
Bethesda

LINK
fallout.bethesda.net

THE SAUCER WASN'T SHY ABOUT SHOOTING AT ME

FRIEND OR UFO

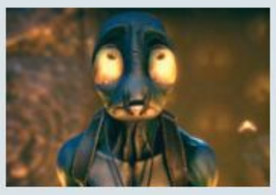
The saucer wasn't shy about shooting at me, pumping energy blasts down as it turned and flew overhead. I just continued to stare at it, thinking, "Wow, this is so cool." What was less cool was an alien, an actual Zetan, who was standing on the ground not far away also blasting me with a space gun. Luckily, for all their

CLOSE ENCOUNTERS

Videogames are packed with aliens. Here are five of our favourites

XENOMORPH
ALIEN: ISOLATION
Terrifying, indestructible, and unrelenting in its quest to sidle right up behind you.

MORDIN
MASS EFFECT 3
Mordin represents the best kind of nerd: the kind who can (eventually) admit they were wrong about something.



ABE
ODDWORLD
It's impossible not to empathise with this timid critter as he tries to free his gentle race from some extremely evil aliens.

IMPOSTER
AMONG US
The fear of an entity that looks just like us. Only in *Among Us*, it's pure comedy when someone else is accused.

MIMIC
PREY
Sorry for the mixup. There's clearly no alien here. Just a coffee mug. Go ahead! Take a sip. It's fine.

advanced technology, like the glowing sci-fi armour it was wearing, it turns out aliens still aren't immune to critical shotgun blasts to the face.

More shots came in as the alien saucer circled around for another strafing run, but this time it wasn't a Zetan shooting at me from the ground but some incredibly stupid raider. I killed him and started concentrating on the saucer. Unfortunately I wasn't packing a mini nuke, missile launcher, gatling laser, or something else suited for taking down a flying tank, because I honestly had no idea the aliens in the mod would be airborne. But my sniper rifle is no joke. There was plenty of cover on the ground and the ship wasn't terribly fast and took a while to turn around. I eventually brought it down, where it made a terrific explosion and left wreckage strewn all over the ground. As a bonus, the dead alien soldier had a little present for me: the Zetan pulse rifle it had been using. I healed up and went hunting for more invaders.

VERY CLOSE ENCOUNTER

Some gunfire drew my attention near a crashed aeroplane, but it just turned out to be an assaultron bot fighting with a couple of minutemen. And what sounded like a vertibird in the distance turned out, this time, to be an actual vertibird. I followed it for a while, but when it began shooting at something it turned out to just be a camp full of super mutants.

On the plus side, I got to use my new alien rifle pulse rifle on plenty of non-alien targets while looking for aliens. It's pretty slick, and every so often it'll wind up freezing a target like an ice cube. Mostly, though, it just looks really cool, makes cool sci-fi sounds, and lets me give my shotgun and sniper rifle a rest.

After a good night's sleep at one of my settlements, I heard some more shooting in the distance while running around. This was a real brawl, and not the kind you'd expect. In a toxic swamp some ghouls were slapping at bloodbugs buzzing around them while not one but two flying saucers circled overhead shooting at all of them. I hadn't been detected yet so I crouched and just watched the ridiculous battle, wondering why the aliens were even bothering to shoot at insects and mindless humanoids fighting over a radioactive puddle. I know it was a long trip through space to get here, but pick your battles.

Once the ghouls and insects were dead the saucers turned their attention on me, and still without a heavy weapon, I quickly folded. When I reloaded back at my settlement, I decided to head north, hoping to run into more alien ground forces and fewer saucers.

Again, it took some time. I heard shots and found a guy named Art shooting at an identical guy named Art, one of those human versus synth battles you come across every so often. I didn't have time to sort it out, so I turned one Art into little chunks of Art with my new pulse rifle and let the other wander off, hoping I'd killed the correct Art. I used my rifle on another assaultron, then found some raiders in Concord battling more Brotherhood of Steel soldiers, who really get around. I received an alert that Sanctuary was under attack and I excitedly fast-travelled there, hoping it was an alien invasion. Unfortunately, it turned out to just be some grubby raiders.

PREDATOR AND PREY

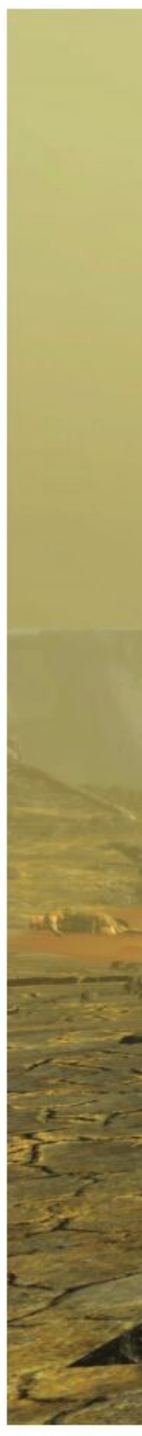
I spotted another vertibird circling around the water tower nearby, but they never started shooting at anything so I travelled further east. I found more mutant mongrels to kill, and more bloodbugs. And then in the distance I heard another vertibird sound. But it wasn't circling. I dropped into a crouch and snuck closer, this time finding a flying saucer parked on a helicopter landing pad, along with several aliens patrolling on foot. I took one visitor out with a headshot with my sniper rifle, then poured shots into the saucer while its engines powered up and it slowly lifted off the ground. Then a powerful burst of energy hit me. It was a Zetan Overlord, looking like some kind of alien wizard and flanked by two hovering drones.

THEN A POWERFUL BURST OF ENERGY HIT ME

If I have some advice to give, it's don't try to kill a Zetan Overlord with a baseball bat, because even if it feels hilarious to bash a space-wizard to death, they're not super vulnerable to a wooden stick. I did manage to kill the alien leader after switching back to my shotgun, and I brought down the saucer too. Again, it's a super satisfying explosion when those ships hit the ground and detonate.

I'm having a blast hunting down alien invaders in the *Zetans!* mod, and if you're looking for an excuse to re-explore the world of *Fallout 4*, I definitely recommend it. Plus, there are more aliens in the mod that I haven't even found yet, including rocket troopers who fly around in jetpacks and Zetan commandos who use stealth cloaking tech to evade you. There are also tougher versions of the UFOs, heavily armoured and capable of teleporting alien soldier squads right into your location. Just bring bigger weapons than I did.

Plus the Zetans have alien frogs (called froggos) they've forced into service as unwilling cannon fodder, and while you'll wind up fighting scores of them, they're not all your enemies. You can liberate one froggo (called Frogbert) and it'll join you as a companion. Welcome to Earth. ■



VAULT-SPECS

The most baffling experiments that took place in a Vault

VAULT 21
It was filled with compulsive gamblers. Uh. Why? Against all odds (ha!) it worked out great and became a booming casino.

VAULT 12
The door didn't close so the effects of radiation could be studied. Why not just study the millions of irradiated people outside the Vault?

VAULT 106
The Vault was flooded with drugs. Everyone went psycho. That's about as useful as flooding it with water to see if anyone would drown.

VAULT 34
Overcrowded, filled with weapons, and had an armoury door that couldn't be locked. You don't even need to guess what happened.

VAULT 114
It was Vault-Tec's one good idea: fill a Vault with politicians and subject them to nasty living conditions. But they never implemented it. Pity.

ABOVE: Welcome to Earth, little froggo.

FAR LEFT: Hopefully the alien gun won't mutate this mutant.

It's a swamp, but that's not swamp gas.

GET GOOD IN OVERWATCH 2

Kick ass and take names in Blizzard's battlefield brawler. ***By Sean Martin, Tyler Colp***

NEED TO KNOW

DIFFICULTY
Normal

TIME
10 hours

VITAL LINKS

Competitive ranks:
bit.ly/3TEAtMf

Battle pass:
bit.ly/3MARowS

Unlocking heroes:
bit.ly/3EKahvq

BUDDY UP

1 In the fast-paced action of *Overwatch 2*, it can be easy to lose track of your teammates. Make sure to pick a buddy and stick with them throughout the match, so you can combine your strengths and avoid getting picked off.

TAKE THE HIGH GROUND

2 In *Overwatch 2*'s winding streets and alleyways, it's important to take the high vantage points, fighting for them if you have to. Using natural cover, such as walls or doors, is also a great way to mitigate unnecessary damage before you commit to a dust up.

SHOOT TO KILL

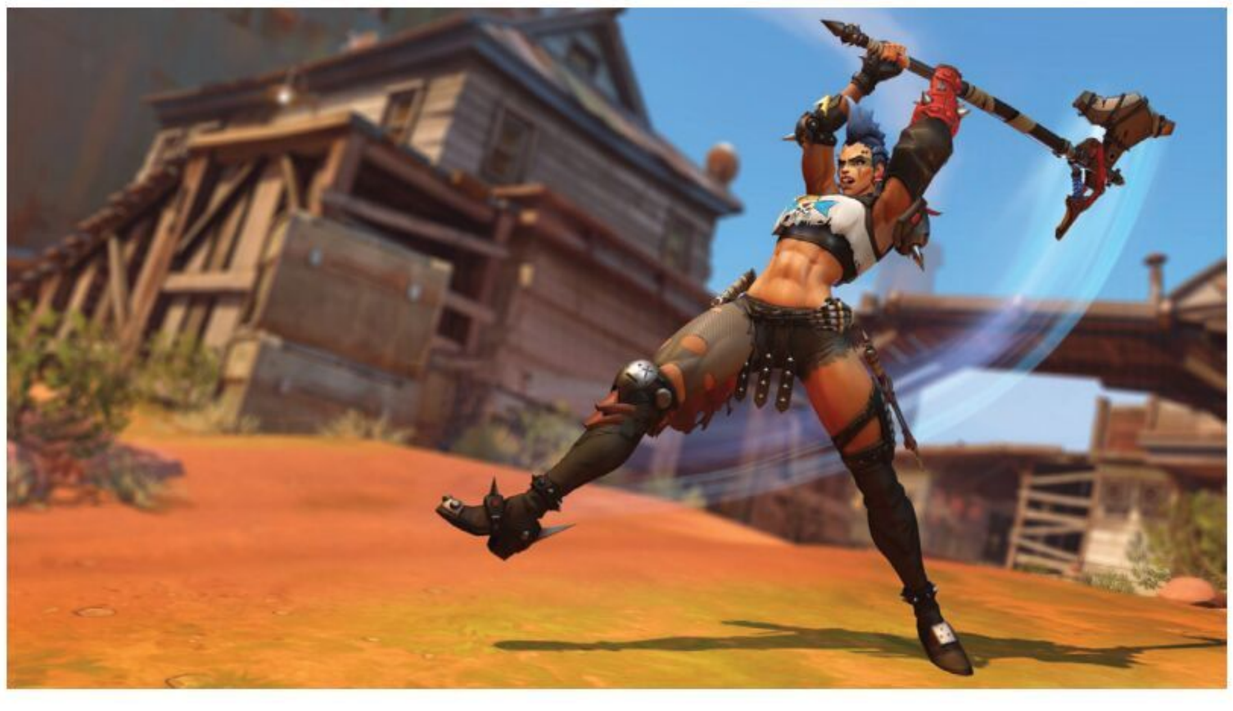
3 Playing a damage hero is all about searching for ways to surprise your opponents. Hunt out angles that let you approach the enemy team without taking damage, then strike when they least expect it, or their tank is distracted.

DON'T BE A HERO

4 Dying is the worst thing you can do in *Overwatch 2*. Not only do you have to get back to your team, but you lose precious time charging your ultimate ability. Prioritise continued survival over say, sacrificing yourself to take out an opponent.

TANKS A LOT

5 Playing a tank doesn't mean you always need to be a bulwark for your team. A tank's job is also about keeping allies alive so they can do their thing, by fending off threats and enemy damage heroes who can appear from any direction during a match.



ULTIMATE POWER

6 Don't save your ultimate. Trying to find the perfect moment to use it will only waste potential charging time, and reduce how much you get to use it per match. Even if you only take out one person, it'll put your opponents on the backfoot.

HEALTHY OPTIONS

7 Support characters are indirectly some of the most powerful in *Overwatch 2*, because healing your allies gives them a big advantage when fighting opponents. Prioritise those who are getting stuck-in to battles over those out of combat.

I NEED A HERO *Unlock the latest characters*

1
SOJOURN
This damage-dealer picks off rivals with her railgun. She's free if you log in before the end of the first season.
2
JUNKER QUEEN
You can get this wasteland warrior for free the same way. The season ends on December 5, so just jump in before then.
3
KIRIKO
Those who owned the first game get her if they log in, everyone else will have to get to tier 55 of the free battle pass.

NO TANKS

8 It's better to avoid tanks than shoot them. As characters, they're built to be hard-to-kill nuisances, so it's better to go for weaker heroes, like support, when the tanks are distracted or otherwise engaged. Someone has to do that distraction, though, so work as a team.

GO FOR GOALS

9 Objectives are important in terms of winning a match in *Overwatch 2*, but it's hard to complete them while also fighting the enemy team. Deal with your opponents first, then make as much progress as you can before they re-engage.

PURE ABILITY

10 It's better not to use abilities for no reason. These are what make your character strong, and without them, you die pretty quickly against opponents. Make sure they're all charged up before you commit yourself to a full-on fight.

REWIND

11 If you can't work out why you keep dying or things aren't panning out, consider watching a replay of your match. This makes it easier to analyse the reasons you're getting killed, which are often harder to see during the heat of a firefight.

ALL CHANGE

12 *Overwatch 2* has many heroes, so if you find your current one isn't working for you, change it up. There's no point grinding away at a character whose playstyle you don't enjoy when there are so many others on offer that might just click.

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Personal adventures in games

ROBBING FROM THE RICH IN

MOUNT & BLADE II: BANNERLORD

Is there room in a world of war, revenge and royalty for a noble outlaw hero? ***By Matt Elliott***

There's an ancient, established tradition of folk tales featuring outlaw heroes. In Australia we have Ned Kelly and the other bushrangers. The US has Davy Crockett and Wyatt Earp. And in China there's an entire genre of writing, called Youxia (literally 'wandering vigilante'), devoted to tales about men who travel the land writing wrongs and protecting the weak. But is it possible to live this way in *Mount & Blade II*? To eschew the feudal trappings of land and power in favour of a life spent living on the road, fighting injustice? Yes. To roam the forests, waiting to strike out against the rich and powerful? Also yes, but to a lesser extent. And only after a *lot* of preparation.

The first part of our journey begins with the birth of our hero. *Bannerlord*'s character creation offers a neat twist on the number crunching of standard RPGS. Instead of building a hero, I create a backstory. The first step is choosing your homeland. I pick Battania, a clan-based culture from the heavily-forested northwest corner of the map. I feel like I'll be spending a significant amount of time chasing bandits – or, equally likely, fleeing lordly retribution – so the woodland terrain buffs the faction provides might prove useful. When things get spicy I can leg it back to the nearest thicket. I spend some time tinkering with my hero, trying to craft an inspiring leader, but, honestly, it feels forced. This is a folk tale. I should put my faith in destiny. What right have I – a human man, sitting at a PC – to create a leader who will change the fate of entire continents? I decide true heroes aren't designed; they're auto-generated. I give myself three rolls of the randomisation dice. The first one resembles a racist sausage roll; the second is so boring I can't even remember him. It's my last roll. I have to stick with the result, whatever happens. The die is cast, and I'll be playing as a car park attendant from a Robin Hood-themed family attraction. I'm not sure I'd follow him to the ticket machine, let alone battle, but fate has chosen.

PENNANT AGREEMENT

My hero's origin story determines his skill set. As an Englishman, the idea of outlaws is inextricably linked to bows, so I lean towards choices that will improve his ranged fighting. I buff his riding skills, too, since I expect he'll be running away a lot. I also need a banner. I want an image that will strike terror into the hearts of evildoers. Something that says 'justice, tempered with mercy'. Instead, I get distracted mid-creation and choose a smiley pink fish on a teal background. I feel like the ignominy of being defeated by a leader whose pennant resembles the sign for a gentrified chippie will be an additional punishment. The final choice is his name. The game suggests Mengus, a title that sounds like a Greek word for the divot above your bumhole, and who am I to argue?

THE RULES

1. Help the weak and harry the wealthy.
2. No alliances, no mercenary work, no fiefdoms.
3. Behave and act like a dashing folk hero.

CAPTIVES ARE RELEASED BECAUSE DRAGGING THEM AROUND SLOWS ME DOWN

Mengus Cromm rides, the world trembles. Actually, the world will have to wait. Because while Mengus Cromm is indeed riding, he's riding alone. *Bannerlord* starts me off with enough money to recruit a decent-sized stack of soldiers, but I feel some reluctance to surround myself with mercenary warriors. Instead, I recruit a small band and spend some time bothering outlaws to hone their skills. If I'm honest, this doesn't feel magnificently heroic. It's like I'm learning to cage fight by kicking homeless people while they sleep. But Mengus of Clan Cromm has a higher purpose, and his army needs the practice. And anyway, if they didn't want to be chased across the map by heroes they shouldn't have called themselves looters.

CLAN PARTY

I win a few battles and realise I need to refine my self-imposed rules to really get a sense of who Mengus is. First of all: Mengus doesn't take prisoners. At least, he doesn't unless they're worth something. I realise this reads like he murders everyone he captures, but this isn't the case. Captives are released because dragging them around the map slows me down. My one concession is that I decide to recruit my first captive, almost like I'm pinning a piece of my child's artwork to the fridge. His ascension through my merry band's ranks will be a reminder of my humble origins and of Mengus' legendary benevolence. When my troops start to level up, I decide to focus on ranged combat. There are a few reasons for this. Firstly, it feels more outlaw-y. Secondly, I'm a stinking coward. Years of playing *Total War* as dwarfs and the English have left me obsessed with the idea of thinning the enemy's ranks long before they reach my line. If the battle ends without anyone having to swing a sword, even better. Unfortunately, I feel like Mengus himself is the weakest link in my otherwise flawless battle plan. When I'm not shooting my own men in the

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arse I'm sending arrows harmlessly sailing above enemy heads. My new, less-heroic plan is to wait until my troops engage, find a nice safe flank and fire arrows into the fleshiest part of the enemy line. Hopefully they leave that bit out of the folk songs.

GRAIN AND THUNDER

It's around now that I make some decisions about the type of work Mengus does. He's not a base mercenary. He only takes jobs that are morally enriching. Protecting desperate villagers from roaming brigands is OK; delivering sheep for a merchant is not. Accepting these quests from village leaders means that I've got enough coin to upgrade my outlaw band, buy horses and stockpile provisions. This also leads me to another decision about my clan: I want them to be deliciously plump. Mengus, apparently, loves to feast. I make sure we've always got grain, fish, butter, olives and beer. We might live like vagabonds, but we eat like lords.

I spend the next few days taking honourable quests and chasing bandits around the map like a terrier after a squirrel. Merchants thank me for keeping the roads safe when I visit the towns. Perhaps not the intention of my noble deeds, but a useful byproduct nonetheless. Not all my quests are successful, though. I agree to train some troops for an imperilled village, but my archers are now so good that my new recruits barely get the chance to connect pitchfork to bandit flesh. It takes weeks for them to level up, and by the time I send them back I feel like I'm returning a broken kettle outside of the warranty period. I also get swayed by a classic 'rescue my daughter' quest – Mengus is a sucker for a damsel in distress – but it turns out that she was just fleeing from her overbearing father, Haretheos of Tarcutis. I decide to do the noble thing: I let her escape to live with her new husband, while I run away from any consequences and flee to a different province. I wasn't planning on going back to Tarcutis anyway.

VITTLE ESSENCE

What's on Mengus' menu?

MONDAY
Grain and butter.

TUESDAY
Grain and cheese.

WEDNESDAY
Grain and grain.

THURSDAY
Grain and olives.

FRIDAY
Grain and fish.

SATURDAY
Flagon of ale with sunor sausage.

SUNDAY
Mug of kvass with a strip of bacon.

It's around now that I find myself in a difficult position. My merry band is small but well-trained. Strong enough to handle most bandit gangs, but still too weak to attack the fat, content merchant caravans that waddle across the land. So, in order to gather enough coin to grow my forces, I make an industry out of looting the looters. I spend days harvesting criminals and selling their gear to towns and villages. If I can double this up with quests to hunt down bandits, even better. Mengus is all about efficiency. After weeks of chaos, fighting, and feasting, I have enough gold to amass a small but dangerous force. I buy stacks of horses to increase my speed – so I can chase down *even more* bandits – and I start to feel good about my place in the world.

There is turmoil on the horizon, though. Sexy turmoil, in a heavy mail coif. I meet the woman who might one day become the love of Mengus' life. For reasons beyond my understanding, Megenhelda of the Dey Tihr intervenes in a fight against a hilariously small group of bandits, bringing her 83-strong army to a battle against five robbers. It's brutal. I can barely see where the enemy is amid all the allied troops. And, apparently, nothing enflames Mengus' ardour like a vulgar display of martial power. He is smitten. More importantly, this proximity gives Mengus an opportunity to try his legendary charm on a member of the aristocracy. If a lowborn hero romancing a rich lady isn't the stuff of folk legend, I don't know what is. We talk about all the stuff Megenhelda is into: generosity, mercy, valour and cheeky bit of roguery. The most astounding thing about all of this is that it goes alarmingly well. We promise to meet again.

BELOW: Look how pleased my heraldic fish is.

FOREST IN PEACE

One of the many cool things about *Bannerlord*'s intricate, reactive world is that I can look up Megenhelda in the game's encyclopaedia – essentially like creeping on her Instagram – and find out who her friends and enemies are. A secondary plan then begins to form. I'll find out who she hates the most and build an army big enough to bother them. Or, more accurately, find out who her weakest enemy is and snap at their heels like an aggressive dog. It turns out that she

IF I CAN GNAW AWAY AT THEIR FORCES THEN MEGENHELDA MIGHT NOTICE ME

has a grudge against a minor faction called the Brotherhood of the Woods. They're like a dark mirror of my very own warband: a group who started off robbing the rich to give to the poor before turning to violence and extortion. They're significantly more powerful than me, but if I can gnaw away at their forces then Megenhelda might notice me.

I manage to find one of the leaders of the Brotherhood armies, isolated and alone. But it's risky. Their force is over twice the size of mine – 59 soldiers to my measly 26. But the good news is that they're poorly trained, not as well fed, and, unlike me, their captain isn't invigorated by his love for a wealthy stranger. I take the high ground, line up my troops, and let Guldrimand of the Brotherhood come to me.

It's a massacre. Guldrimand falls before he reaches my line and my ranged troops annihilate his forces. My infantry barely has time to engage. My mighty pony falls during the battle, but I escape otherwise unscathed. I earn my first big victory, killing or injuring all of their army and only losing one soldier myself. It's a victory that earns me a fat slab of renown as well as a serious morale boost to my army. I capture Guldrimand, who I can ransom for 1,000 gold. The most important thing, however, is that the surrounding towns and villages are safer now, and that the lady Mengus slightly fancies is mildly impressed by my heroism. There's a grim irony in the first wealthy lord I ransom being a heroic outlaw who went rotten, but it's a lesson that Mengus of Clan Cromm won't soon forget. You die a hero, or live long enough to get captured by a horny Battanian peasant eager to impress a woman he's only met once. Sit the fuck down, Ivanhoe. There's a new folk hero in town. ■

02m:21s
Victory
You gained 12.7 renown.
You gained 6.9 morale.
Attacker Army 24 59 6 1 1 0
Mengus' Party 24 59 6 1 1 0
Defender Army 0 2 0 39 20 0
Done

TOP: I'm the horse in the background. And none of these men are mine.

LEFT: I'm writing this out and leaving it in Guldrimand's cell.

What makes g

VANQUISHING MAPS IN

GUILD WARS

A bygone tradition from my first MMORPG. *By Lauren Morton*

LEFT: In *Guild Wars*, you don't have to solo alone.

RIGHT: A map full of gold icons feels like its own reward.

Back in the original heyday of games that wanted to be *World of Warcraft*, there was a mostly MMO called *Guild Wars*. It got treated as an MMO, and it played it like one, because it had player hubs and PvP and a trade chat channel. *Guild Wars* had one important difference from other MMORPGs at the time: its combat zones were instanced, meaning that only you and your party members were present and also that enemies would not respawn unless you left and re-entered the map zone. That's what allowed for my favourite achievement track in *Guild Wars*: the Vanquisher challenges.

To vanquish a map zone in *Guild Wars*, you kill every single enemy in the zone instance. It's that easy. Oh, also you have to do it on hard mode, which means enemies with more health and better AI. Also, the number of enemies on the map isn't always the same, and many maps have hidden enemies. Also, there are 54 map zones required to earn the title Tyrian Vanquisher for the main campaign, let alone the 33 and 34 respectively for the *Factions* and *Nightfall* expansions, all three of which you need to become a Legendary Vanquisher.

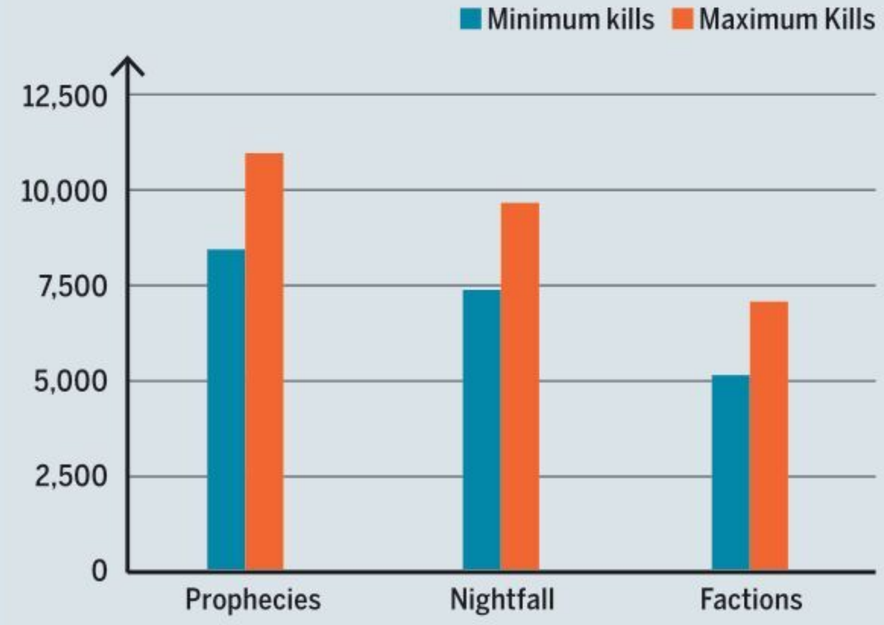
I probably don't need to explain why clearing an entire zone is inherently so satisfying. If you've ever obsessively cleared fog of war from a map, you'll understand why it feels so good to watch the bar of enemies killed tick upwards to completion. Plus, the game's helmet logo would fade onto screen in gold to mark my success, turning the zone's icon on the main map the same colour to mark my progress across the continent with each red helmet icon I flipped to gold.

It isn't always quite so straightforward as just hoovering up baddies though. A number of *Guild Wars* maps have hidden enemies – like the giant scorpion-like Devourers that sometimes hide underground until you're close enough. Other maps have patrolling enemies that are easy to miss and difficult to find using only the minimap. On numerous occasions I've had my kill counter floating around six kills from completion, unsure if I'm meant to trigger some hidden group of monsters waiting to spawn or if I need to chase down a sneaky patrol someplace way out of sight.

Not only that, but if you or a party member happened to have a quest active in the area, you'd likely rope yourself into an inflated kill count required. More than once I happened to accidentally leave a quest active during a *Nightfall* expansion vanquish attempt, forcing me to clear out dozens of extra corsairs.

KILLS CONFIRMED

Enemies required for a Vanquisher title



Even though they're done in hard mode, I always found vanquishing maps a much more laid back activity than running story missions. I could occasionally drag a guild mate along to clear a zone or two with me, catching up and cracking jokes in chat. Even the times that it was just me, vanquishing was relaxing. There were no cutscenes to watch, no mission steps to complete, just me and a whole slew of various charr, tengu, and centaurs to fight.

PAST GLORIES

Vanquishing is particularly special to me because it's so squarely part of *Guild Wars*' past. I've long since been a player of its sequel, full-fledged and server sharded MMO *Guild Wars 2*, which features boss respawns and public events and, by nature, no vanquishing. By now, the hours I've put into *Guild Wars 2* surpass my time in the original. Much as the sequel sucked me in, it does always feel like it wants more from me – the seasonal stories and new gear tiers and other grinding incentives that mark our live service world. I'm such a sucker for completionism that I miss the ability to proudly put a pin in something like a Vanquisher title and call it 'done' for good.

EVEN DURING THE TIMES THAT IT WAS JUST ME, VANQUISHING WAS RELAXING

In the end, I only wound up earning a single Vanquisher title. I wore it proudly all the same, and continued plucking away at slaying zones in the main campaign and the *Nightfall* expansion until the *Guild Wars 2*'s launch tore me away. But *Guild Wars* is still online, and is still somehow unique among online RPGs, so vanquishing yet lives for those that love it. ■

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE 2005	**DEVELOPER** ArenaNet
OUR REVIEW N/A	**LINK** guildwars.com

LEFT: If I never see another Kournan patrol it will still be too soon.

RIGHT: A Vanquisher among heroes.

WARHAMMER 101K

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VETERAN

Lord Warren Hammer's soldiers are as skilled as their faces are swollen (from countless bee stings inflicted in the Honey Wars). Ceremonial gas masks hide their lumpenness from the general population.

ZEALOT

Adherents to holy scripture revealed to them by a disgraced sci-fi author, zealots hurl themselves into battle to distract themselves from the self-loathing generated by their church-mandated haircuts.

PSYKER

Driven mad by their inability to sleep in the presence of their own glowing hands, these space wizards telepathically bombard their enemies with controversial podcast recommendations.

OGRYN

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[1]App subscriptions may be required. TV tuner is not included. [2]Requires internet connection. [3]Requires a Wi-Fi, Bluetooth or other wireless network connection and devices registered to SmartThings app.